



Interfaith Relations in Contemporary Indonesia: Challenges and Progress

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I. Introduction

In February 2014 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) published a report concerning the rise of religious intolerance across Indonesia. Entitled *Indonesia: Pluralism in Peril*,¹ this study portrays the problems plaguing interfaith relations in Indonesia, where many religious minorities suffer from persecution and injustice. The report lists five main factors contributing to the rise of religious intolerance: (1) the spread of extremist ideology through media channels, such as the internet, religious pamphlets, DVDs, and other means, funded from inside and outside the country; (2) the attitude of local, provincial, and national authorities; (3) the implementation of discriminatory laws and regulations; (4) weakness of law enforcement on the part of police and the judiciary in cases where religious minorities are victimized; and (5) the unwillingness of a “silent majority” to speak out against intolerance.² This list of factors shows that the government bears considerable responsibility. Nevertheless, the hope for a better way to manage Indonesia’s diversity was one reason why Joko Widodo was elected president of the Republic of Indonesia in October 2014.

Joko Widodo (popularly known as “Jokowi”) is a popular leader with a relatively positive governing record. He was the mayor of Surakarta (Solo) from 2005 to 2012, and then the governor of Jakarta from 2012 to 2014. People had great expectations for Jokowi’s administration, and there have been positive improvements during his term. However, Human Rights Watch (HRW) *World Report 2016* presents negative data regarding his record on human rights in the year 2015, including those pertaining to interfaith relations.³ The document

¹ The pdf version of the report can be downloaded freely from Christian Solidarity Worldwide, “Indonesia: Pluralism in Peril,” February 14, 2014. <http://www.csw.org.uk/2014/02/14/report/179/article.htm>. Accessed May 20, 2016.

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Human Rights Watch, “Indonesia: Events in 2015” in *World Report 2016* <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/indonesia#459682>. Accessed May 20, 2016.

observes, “President Joko Widodo’s record during his first year in office was mixed. His administration signaled it would more actively defend the rights of Indonesia’s beleaguered religious minorities, victimized by both Islamist militants and discriminatory laws, but made few concrete policy changes.”⁴ HRW data are in accordance with the Setara Institute’s report, which lists 197 violations and 236 acts of violence in 2015, a significant increase from 2014’s 134 violations and 177 acts of violence.⁵

What these reports document are irrefutable facts, indicating the challenges to interfaith relations in contemporary Indonesia. Nonetheless, any attempt to analyze Indonesia as a country is never an easy task because, as Benedict Anderson has suggested, Indonesia is an imagined community that consists of many different social groupings and identities. Among these, Islam is perhaps dominant.⁶ Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the country’s particular locus and unique dynamics in order to properly analyze its status. To illustrate these dynamics, here I will highlight the experience of interfaith relations in four regions of contemporary Indonesia. The first case involves the burning and closing of churches in Singkil, Aceh in October 2015. The second example comes from Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, and its non-Muslim governor, who has been the target of protests and controversy since early 2014. The third case is located on Nias Island, a Christian majority region: there one group works independently on educational programs that have a wider impact, maintaining local peace and interfaith relations. The last case draws from the province of Maluku and the activities of the Peace Provocateurs, a civil society group that has played a major role in building and maintaining peace in the aftermath of a dreadful inter-religious conflict.

II. Examples of Interfaith Relations in Contemporary Indonesia

1. Church Demolition in Singkil, Aceh

The Singkil, Aceh violence is perhaps the most well-known incident of interfaith conflict to have occurred during Jokowi’s reign.⁷ It took place on October 13, 2015, when a mob under the name Aceh Singkil Islamic Youth Movement attacked and burned down the *Huria Kristen Indonesia* (Indonesian Christian Church) church building. The attackers claimed to be unhappy because the local government administration had failed to enforce Indonesian national law applying to “illegal houses of worship”—in this instance, churches built and operating without proper legal permits.⁸ A week before the attack, several mass organizations mounted a protest demanding that the local administration remove the church building, because, they said, it had

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abba Gabrillin, “Laporan Setara Institute, Pelanggaran Kebebasan Beragama Meningkat pada 2015,” *Kompas.com* January 18, 2015, <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/01/18/17250491/Laporan.Setara.Institute.Pelanggaran.Kebebasan.Beragama.Meningkat.di.2015>. Accessed May 20, 2016.

⁶ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁷ For instance, Christian Solidarity Wide mentions the Aceh Singkil incident in two articles. CSW, “Indonesia US Urged to Raise Religious Intolerance,” October 23, 2015, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2015/10/23/press/2833/article.htm> and CSW, “One Dead and Church Burned in Aceh,” October 15, 2015, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2015/10/15/news/2815/article.htm>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

⁸ The Jakarta Post, “2,500 flee to North Sumatra after church burning in Aceh Singkil,” October 14, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/10/14/2500-flee-north-sumatra-after-church-burning-aceh-singkil.html>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

been erected without the proper permits. At that time, the local government had agreed to close at least 13 churches in the Singkil area and require all remaining churches to adhere to the requirements for obtaining permits. However, the mob felt that the government had failed to keep its promise, and so they decided to take the matter into their own hands.⁹ The mob demolished several buildings before the police and army arrived and stopped its destructive activity.¹⁰

During this particular incident, one of the rioters died from a gunshot wound and several others were injured. Immediately after, some 2,500 people, consisting mainly of the Batak Pakpak people, who are minority in that region, fled to North Sumatra's border areas and became refugees.¹¹ The number rose to more than 4,000 a few days later. The refugees fled in response to rumors that they too were to be targeted for attack.¹² Then nine other churches were demolished by the *Satuan Polisi Pamong Praja* (Singkil's Public Order Agency) on October 24 as a follow-up of the previous agreement made by Aceh's local government consultative forum (MUSPIDA). In addition, the Singkil police chief was dismissed for his failure to prevent the violence. Ultimately, the police named ten suspects, three of them were caught by the police after the incident.¹³

The Singkil, Aceh incident is not an isolated case. In the Aceh region itself, according to a CSW article, in 2012 there were at least twenty cases of church closings or threats.¹⁴ Indeed, church closures under the pretext of lacking legal building permits occurred many times in several different regions of Indonesia, and have contributed to the escalation of interfaith tensions, especially between Muslims and Christians. Underlying this phenomenon is the difficult process required for obtaining a legal building permit for a house of worship; as a result, many churches are labelled "illegal." The group known as Solidarity of Victims of Freedom of Religion and Belief Violence (SobatKBB) states that the Singkil incident is a result of the discriminatory government policy for building houses of worship, a policy introduced in 1979.¹⁵

In this atmosphere of tenuous legality and interfaith tension, Ramli Malik, a local Muslim figure from Singkil, has denied that the Singkil incident was an instance of interreligious conflict. He states confidently that interfaith relations between Muslims and Christians in Singkil have always been positive, with no previous incidents of violence. In his opinion, the incident was caused by the local government's delays in granting permits to the churches. Thus, he has

⁹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "One Dead and Church Burned in Aceh." Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹⁰ Suriyanto, "Sebagian Warga Aceh Singkil Mengungsi ke Tapanuli Tengah," CNN Indonesia October 13, 2015. <http://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20151013163714-20-84743/sebagian-warga-aceh-singkil-mengungsi-ke-tapanuli-tengah/>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹¹ According to my informant, most of the refugees are the Pakpak people, a sub-ethnic of Batak, who came originally from North Sumatra area. The refugees consist of not only Christians but also Muslims.

¹² The Jakarta Post, "More Singkil residents flee to North Sumatra" October 15, 2015. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/10/15/more-singkil-residents-flee-north-sumatra.html>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹³ Erika Anindita, "Government is absent in preventing conflict in Aceh Singkil, experts say," The Jakarta Post October 26, 2015. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/10/26/government-absent-preventing-conflict-aceh-singkil-experts-say.html>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹⁴ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "Indonesia Rising Religious Intolerance," June 21, 2012. <http://www.csw.org.uk/2012/06/21/press/1388/article.htm>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹⁵ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "One Dead and Church Burned in Aceh." Accessed May 23, 2016.

urged the local government to be more receptive to and less discriminatory in granting building permits for houses of worship, so there will be no more violence.¹⁶ The Setara Institute agrees with Ramli Malik regarding the Singkil incident. The Setara Institute's activists blame the local government for discriminating against minorities, especially with regard to church building permits.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Setara Institute recommends that the Indonesian government revise the regulation concerning the construction of houses of worship.¹⁸ This recommendation is important, in my opinion, because the current regulation has left many churches vulnerable for not having permit, a vulnerability that eventually can be used by local extremist groups to close churches on the pretext of upholding government's regulation.

2. The Controversy of a Non-Muslim Governor in Jakarta¹⁹

After Jokowi was elected Indonesia's president in 2014, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as "Ahok"), his vice-governor, became the interim governor of Jakarta. The Indonesian constitution requires the vice-governor to become governor in such cases. During the transition period leading up to Ahok's official inauguration in November 2014, there was a public controversy concerning Ahok's religious identity. Despite the constitution's requirement that Ahok replace Jokowi, there were groups opposing Ahok's succession on the grounds, much debated in Muslim circles, that Islamic law allegedly prohibits a non-Muslim from serving as a leader of Muslims. In this regard, the 2010 census concluded that Muslims constitute over 85% of Jakarta's total population, while Christians (Protestants and Catholics) amount to around 10%. Significantly, Ahok is a Chinese-Indonesian and a Christian, both minority categories. On the other hand, like Jokowi, he is popular among people—not because of his personal identity but because he has a good record of governing.²⁰

Those involved in the public controversy in this period of transition included certain Islamist proponents. The *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defender Front or FPI), a hardline Islamist militia, was among those who protested Ahok's candidacy most loudly. The FPI announced its dissent through mass demonstrations and media, including an article posted on their official website.²¹ The article emphasized the Islamic precept prohibiting the election of a non-Muslim leader for Muslims. Despite these protests, Ahok gained more support to replace Jokowi as the governor of Jakarta, including support from particular prominent Indonesian Muslim leaders.

¹⁶ Kristian Erdianto, "Tidak Ada Intoleransi di Aceh Singkil..." *Kompas.com* April 23, 2016.

<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/04/23/04330051/Tidak.Ada.Intoleransi.di.Aceh.Singkil>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹⁷ Yustinus Paat, "Setara Institute Desak Pemerintah Aceh Singkil Permudah Izin Pendirian Rumah Ibadah," *Beritasatu.com* October 25, 2015. <http://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/316710-setara-institute-desak-pemerintah-aceh-singkil-permudah-izin-pendirian-rumah-ibadah.html>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹⁸ Siaran Pers Setara Institute, "Revisi Aturan Tata Kelola Pendirian Rumah Ibadah," October 15, 2015. <http://setara-institute.org/revisi-aturan-tata-keleola-pendirian-rumah-ibadah/>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

¹⁹ Some parts of this section have been published in Hans Abdiel Harmakaputra, "Islamism and Post-Islamism: "Non-Muslim" in Socio-Political Discourse of the United States and Indonesia," in *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 53/1 (2015): 196-199.

²⁰ Joe Cochrane, "An Ethnic Chinese Christian, Breaking Barriers in Indonesia," *The New York Times* (2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/world/asia/an-ethnic-chinese-christian-breaking-barriers-in-indonesia.html?smid=fb-share&r=3>. Accessed May 21, 2016.

²¹ Front Pembela Islam, "Dalil Quran Haramnya Orang Kafir Memimpin Umat Islam," *fpi.or.id*. <http://www.fpi.or.id/138-Dalil-Quran-Haramnya-Orang-Kafir-Memimpin-Umat-Islam.html>. Accessed November 24, 2014. It is no longer available when I tried to access it on December 2015.

For example, Ali Mustafa Yaqub, at that time the Grand Imam of Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta—he died in April 2016—stated publicly and repeatedly his belief that Muslims should not choose a non-Muslim as their ruler; nonetheless, he stressed that Ahok’s candidacy was in accordance with the constitution. Thus, Yaqub urged Muslims to follow the constitution and accept Ahok as the leader of Jakarta, except if Ahok would be asking Muslims to do evil things, or act against their religion.²² In addition, Nusron Wahid, a young politician and a leading figure of the *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor* (Ansor Youth Movement), which is affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama, made a daring comment in a television debate: he refuted FPI’s rejection of Ahok. Wahid reminded his listeners that *Pancasila*²³ is the sole foundation of Indonesia, so that any objections to elected leaders based on sectarian views are considered invalid. Furthermore, he noted that Indonesia has three types of laws: state laws based on the constitution, Islamic law, and customary law. The highest of these, he stressed, is the constitution. Thus, should the constitution stipulate Ahok as the next governor, then Indonesian Muslims are obliged to follow that result, under the constitution. Wahid further delineated his thinking: the logic of the constitution cannot be voided by the logic of any religion, including Islam.²⁴ Nusron Wahid’s position on the primacy of the constitution was similar to that of Said Aqil Siradj, the General Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama. Wahid based his conclusion on the primacy of the constitution. Siradj based his on the electoral reality that placed Ahok next in line to be governor: Ahok was elected by the people of Jakarta and everyone must respect that fact.²⁵

Once the controversy ended, Ahok began his term as governor on November 18, 2014. Despite the objections based on Ahok’s personal faith, many Muslims believed that Indonesia should be governed by the constitution. Their acceptance of Ahok as governor at that time did not entail their acceptance of a non-Muslim leader per se; rather, it reflected their display of fidelity to the democratic system and constitution. Furthermore, their evaluation of Ahok did not relate to his personal faith, but to his capability to act justly, maintain good-governance, improve people’s welfare, and combat corruption.

Currently, Ahok is becoming the center of attention again because there will be another general election for Jakarta’s governorship in February 2017. Moreover, since the end of 2015, he has been the constant victim of smear campaigns. Ade Armando, a journalist and lecturer at the *Universitas Indonesia* (University of Indonesia), wrote an editorial in which he lists public figures who have launched smear campaigns against Ahok based on the latter’s religious or ethnic identity.²⁶ There are Muslim figures, politicians, university lecturers, a famous musician,

²² Interview with Ali Mustafa Yaqub, “Demo Anarkistis Haram,” *Majalah Detik* 17-23 November 2014 (pp. 23-33). http://majalah.detik.com/cb/df787dfd7c1bccb95362c632e37641c6/2014/20141117_MajalahDetik_155.pdf. Accessed May 21, 2016.

²³ Pancasila literally means five principles: Belief in the one and only God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy led by the wisdom of deliberations among representatives, and social justice. It is the formal ideology of Indonesia since its independence and was invented to bridge Islamist and Nationalist perspectives.

²⁴ Full transcript of Nusron Wahid’s statements, “Transkrip Lengkap Komentar Ketua Umum GP Ansor Nusron Wahid di ILC,” *muslimmedianews.com* <http://www.muslimmedianews.com/2014/10/transkrip-lengkap-komentar-ketua-umum-gp.html>. Accessed May 21, 2016.

²⁵ Official website of Nahdlatul Ulama, “NU supports Ahok as governor of Jakarta,” *nu.or.id*. <http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/55752/nu-supports-ahok-as-governor-of-jakarta>. Accessed May 23, 2016.

²⁶ Ade Armando, “Kebodohan, Kelucuan, dan Kebohongan dalam Kampanye SARA Melawan Ahok,” Editorial of *madinaonline.id* March 26, 2016. <http://www.madinaonline.id/c907-editorial/kebodohan-kelucuan-dan-kebohongan-dalam-kampanye-sara-melawan-ahok/>. Accessed May 21, 2016.

and a retired military person on the list. For instance, Rizieq Shihab, the leader of FPI, has repeatedly urged Jakarta's voters not to choose Ahok in the next election because Muslims must choose a Muslim as their leader.²⁷ Besides religious and racial identity issues, the smear campaigns have also focused on charges of corruption, none of which has been proven so far. Despite these efforts, it seems that the people's perception of Ahok remains highly favorable: a survey taken at the end of 2015 showed that 64% are satisfied with Ahok's leadership.²⁸ Another survey conducted by a different institution found that the satisfaction rate remains high, around 73% in 2016.²⁹ These positive trends reflect Ahok's good governance. That track record and the populace's satisfaction with it have rendered the smear campaigns ineffective.

3. Literacy Program and Its Contribution to Interfaith Relations in Nias

Nias is a small island located in North Sumatra, with a population of approximately 131,000 people. It has a distinct culture and dialect, and is famous as a tourism destination because of its natural beauty, especially its beaches, which are well known as ideal places for surfing and diving. More than 90 percent of the population is Christian. The economic status of the Nias people is quite low, albeit improving. One reason for this improvement is the grant of greater autonomy by the central government to local governments, including more freedom to utilize their natural resources for their own benefit, that follow the Reformation in 1998.

I lived on that island in 2009, and can attest to conditions there: Nias's inhabitants were generally poor and suffered from a low level of educational achievement. However, reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the tsunami and earthquake of December 2005 had contributed to the island's development to some extent. Many humanitarian aid missions from foreign countries and the United Nations benefitted the island's people: many schools and hospitals were built. However, Nias still lacked the human resources, such as qualified teachers, doctors, and nurses, to staff the new facilities. To address this need, some local civil society organizations emerged; one of them is *Kandang Boekoe*. This name literally means "the Den of Books." From now on, I will refer to it as "the Den".

The Den is located in Gunung Sitoli, a small city that is also the capital of Nias Regency. Its initial mission was to arouse interest in reading among the people of the neighborhood, especially children and students. The founder, Reny Zagoto, opened a small wooden-shack in front of her house and filled it with her book collection. Reny originally came from Java, but moved to Nias with her husband, a Nias native. She was troubled by the lack of education on the island and became even more alarmed when she witnessed how students from different schools frequently brawled on the road in front of her house. She believed these young people needed better activities than fighting, so she built the Den in 2008. In front of the shack, she labelled the Den a "Non-Fighting Zone." When fighting would break out, she would go out personally to stop the brawling. The neighborhood became more peaceful and, slowly, children and young people became interested in reading and borrowing books.

²⁷ Ibid. See also <http://www.indoheadlinenews.com/2016/02/habib-rizieq-umat-islam-jakarta-jangan.html>. Accessed May 21, 2016.

²⁸ Based on a survey conducted by Saiful Munjani Research and Consulting. Jessi Carina, "SMRC: Tingkat Kepuasan Masyarakat Terhadap Ahok Lebih Tinggi dari Foke," *Kompas.com* October 14, 2015.

²⁹ A survey by Populi Center in April 2016. Taufiqurrohman, "Survei: Tingkat Kepuasan Warga terhadap Ahok 81,5 Persen," *Liputan6.com* April 25, 2016. <http://news.liputan6.com/read/2491978/survei-tingkat-kepuasan-warga-terhadap-ahok-815-persen>. Accessed May 21, 2016.

The Den has continued to this day. It is operated by volunteers, including Muslims, who are interested in its educational purpose and are willing to contribute their time and energy to run the library. There are also people from outside Nias who support the Den by sending used books. In short, the library relies heavily on voluntarism.

Slowly their programs have expanded, especially in promoting reading interest for children and young people outside the neighborhood. The Den runs a program for lending books to Kindergartens (PAUD), including remote ones, whereby a school can request books to borrow for free. Teachers are also free to use books for activities with children. After two or three months all the books must be returned and new books will be sent. This program is especially useful to those kindergartens located in remote areas where people lack access to books.³⁰ There are also Islamic kindergartens that benefit from that program. Sometimes, the Den is a destination for middle school students' field trips: they can spend several hours there reading books.³¹ Despite its limitations in resources, books, and volunteers, the Den's staffs are trying their best to reach out to people, even those who are far from its location. The Den also partakes in other means of empowering society, such as co-sponsoring an anti-corruption seminar and a writing competition about anti-corruption.³²

In my last interview with Reny,³³ she mentioned that the Den is still doing fine in its efforts through constant support from volunteers, even though the group of volunteers is small in number. The Kindegarten project is also growing, although she laments that the progress is too slow. She expects that each Kindegarten will be able to establish its own library, and the teachers should become more creative. But these initiatives remain unfinished. The Kindegartens, she said, are more concerned with building facilities such as playgrounds and less focused on establishing libraries. She also hopes the Den will facilitate more programs that can creatively empower children and young people.

Even facing such limitations, the Den is a great example of a movement initiated by local people and intentionally aimed at bringing peace and empowering the community. Although it does not focus on interfaith activity directly, the Den has helped promote interfaith engagement and harmony through activities that involve Muslims and Christians together.

³⁰ Ketjel Parangdjati Zagötö, "Menanamkan Budaya Membaca pada Anak Usia Dini," *Nias-bangkit.com* September 13, 2013. <http://www.nias-bangkit.com/2013/09/menanamkan-budaya-membaca-pada-anak-usia-dini/>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

³¹ DI, "Kandang Boekoe, Sebuah Oase di Gunungsitoli," *Nias-bangkit.com* January 21, 2011. <http://www.nias-bangkit.com/2011/01/kandang-boekoe-sebuah-oase-di-gunungsitoli/>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

³² Panitia Lomba Menulis NBC, "NBC Gelar Lomba Menulis Artikel Antikorupsi," *Nias-bangkit.com* October 18, 2011. <http://www.nias-bangkit.com/2011/10/nbc-gelar-lomba-menulis-artikel-antikorupsi/>. Accessed May 25, 2016. STL, "Seminar Antikorupsi, Masyarakat di Pulau Nias Antusias," *Nias-bangkit.com* December 9, 2011. <http://www.nias-bangkit.com/2011/12/seminar-antikorupsi-masyarakat-di-pulau-nias-antusias/>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

³³ Through personal conversation on Facebook on August 29, 2015.



Figure 1 Left: The Den of Books; Right: Reny, the founder, and Islamic Kindegarten students who borrow books

4. The Role of a Civil Society Group in Sustaining Peace and Positive Interfaith Relations in Maluku

After the fall of President Suharto in 1998, harsh religious conflicts tore apart several regions of Indonesia, such as the island of Maluku, and especially its capital Ambon. The Maluku situation was the most horrendous, in terms of the scale of deaths and the extent of destruction. Sumanto al-Qurtuby noted that the conflict in Maluku resulted in thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of injuries, and produced a mass of refugees in the region, approximately one-third to one-half of the total population.³⁴ Prior to Suharto's decline, however, Maluku was regarded as a tranquil and peaceful realm, even with its potential for conflict given its evenly numbered populace between Muslims and Christians. But after Suharto's departure, a single episode sparked violence: a Christian driver, and his Muslim passenger disturbed that balance, and became the catalyst for the communal conflict that set the whole region ablaze. Several players, including the government and civil organizations, attempted to restore peace to the region but without sustainable success.³⁵ In fact, although afterward the region seemed to enjoy—at least, at a superficial level—a couple of years of calm, the memory of religious conflict haunted the Mollucans (the people of Maluku) so that the possibility of future conflict always lurked beneath the surface of civil society. Finally, it manifested as concrete reality again on 11 September 2011 with the death of a Muslim motorist in a Christian neighborhood. Again, religious conflict consumed the capital city.

However, this particular conflict did not expand beyond the limits of Ambon due, in part, to the active efforts of the Peace Provocateurs (*Provokator Perdamaian*), whose name was meant to counter the notorious connotations of "provocateur."³⁶ An interfaith group without formal structure and based on voluntaristic commitment, Peace Provocateurs was comprised of people, including some religious leaders, who wished to restore peaceful and harmonious relations in Ambon in the conflict's aftermath.³⁷ In 2011, as the conflict was re-ignited, the

³⁴ Sumanto al-Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia: Christian-Muslim Alliances in Ambon Island," in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 24:3 (2013): 351.

³⁵ Qurtuby has done a deep research on this matter in Sumanto al-Qurtuby, "Interreligious Violence, Civic Peace, and Citizenship: Christians and Muslims in Maluku, Eastern Indonesia," PhD diss. (2012), Boston University.

³⁶ Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia," 357.

³⁷ Andrew Stroehlein, "How 'peace provocateurs' are defusing religious tensions in Indonesia," *Independent.co.uk* March 12, 2012. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/how-peace-provocateurs-are-defusing-religious-tensions-in-indonesia-7562725.html>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

Peace Provocateurs actively intervened on several fronts in order to pacify an unstable situation and contain a conflict that threatened to engulf the whole region. In particular, their use of social media was successful. At one stage, the group circulated short text-messages and reports via social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, in order to clarify the facts of an accident involving the Muslim motorist. Their actions aimed to restrain people from further fighting.³⁸ On another occasion, having probed the validity of news being circulated about a Christian girl abducted in a Muslim neighborhood, volunteers from Peace Provocateurs located the girl, healthy and safe, and then circulated her status in order to prevent further bloodshed.³⁹ These episodes illustrate how Peace Provocateurs utilize the psychology of the masses: the Peace Provocateurs understood that people are vulnerable to violent error in times of conflicts. Some seek to take advantage of these volatile situations to foment conflict. Peace Provocateurs counter that phenomenon with similar methods in order to influence the masses in a positive direction.

Specifically, Reverend Jacklevyn (Jacky) Manuputty, who is one of the founders of Peace Provocateurs and a recipient of Peacemaker in Action Award from Tannembaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, has noted that the group's intention is to build peace among people from differing religious backgrounds in Ambon. Peace Provocateurs use varied, creative strategies to set up meaningful encounter between seemingly opposed religious groups.⁴⁰ Their activities go beyond countering negative news that could incite new conflict; they are also proactive. Thus, they are offering the following initiatives: a peace curriculum for schools, trauma-healing workshops, peace-specific sermons in churches and mosques, and interfaith "live-ins," when participants stay a night or two in the house of a family from a different religious identity.⁴¹ Youth, in particular, are the target audience of the Peace Provocateurs. Rev. Jacky explains that their interfaith and peace-building activities for the youth of Maluku are not using religious means *per se*—such as an interfaith talk about religion. Rather, these activities address cultural and personal behavior by inviting young people to mix in public spaces through music, photography, and other creative vehicles.⁴² In such settings, people can connect to one another in meaningful ways, building friendships which then create mutual trust and lead to a communal vision for a better future.

Through the efforts of many people, including the Peace Provocateurs, the current situation in Maluku has improved significantly.⁴³ People have now recognized their past mistakes and are more aware of the ulterior motives of some who fuel interreligious conflict. As a result of this awakening, more people are now participating in broader interfaith initiatives. The improved

³⁸ Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia," 357-358.

³⁹ Stroehlein. See also Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia," 358.

⁴⁰ Personal conversation with Rev. Jacky Manuputty. See also his talk on Youtube, "Pdt Jacky Manuputty: Maluku, Konflik, dan Provokator Perdamaian." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5QV-3SvtA>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

⁴¹ Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia," 358.

⁴² Personal conversation with Rev. Jacky Manuputty. For instance, they organized "Art for Peace" that involved international peacemakers in 2012. See some of this event activities on Youtube, "Art for Peace, Maluku 2012." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IC51RaBgO84>. Accessed May 25, 2016. See also Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia," 358.

⁴³ Another key person from Peace Provocateurs, Abidin Wakano, is still doing what he can in maintaining peace in his community through his role as Muslim leader through peace sermon in mosque, peace talk in schools, and other means. Youtube, "360 19 JULI 2015 - Provokator Damai dari Tanah Maluku." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTgWo7saCIw>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

atmosphere is apparent in the new conduct of certain residents; for example, the Muslims of a village called *Batu Merah* are willing to host Christian delegations from all over Indonesia traveling to Ambon for the National Church Choir Competition (*Pesparawi*) in October 2015.⁴⁴ This initiative, a resident-run endeavor, signifies the shift in attitude and proves that Muslim residents of Maluku can support Christians.⁴⁵

As for the Peace Provocateurs, they are continuing to make connections between people. In September 2015, for instance, Rev. Jacky brought ten college students from the *Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ambon* (Islamic State Institute of Ambon) to participate in an internship at the headquarters of the *Gereja Protestan Maluku* (Maluku Protestant Church).⁴⁶ In our latest interview, Rev. Jacky informed me of the most recent strategy for Maluku—the social, political, and economic development of the Mollucans. One case of their projects is the “Save Aru” campaign, which opposes social injustice and ecological destruction in the Maluku islands. Poverty, oppression, and injustice are Indonesia’s basic and classic problems, especially for places beyond the island of Java, which suffer from unequal distribution of resources between the central government in Java and its outlying islands. In this regard, the Peace Provocateurs are aiming to delve deeper in order to reach the root of the interreligious conflicts in social welfare. The Mollucans are voicing their dissatisfaction with economic, political, and social injustices, an array of problems which have provoked them to misdirected interreligious violence.

III. Interfaith Relations in Contemporary Indonesia: Some Observations

An overview of Indonesia’s patterns of interfaith relations reveals both successes and failures on the part of governmental and non-governmental groups and individuals. Thus, violence against churches arose from unfair government regulation. The Singkil incident, where a mob attacked and burned down churches, is not an isolated case. Although it was the first instance of such violence in that area, similar events have occurred many times in other places in Indonesia. All of those events are related to the problematic and discriminatory regulations for churches to obtain a building permit: religious minority groups are the ones seeking permits, so they become the usual victims. It seems that the government under Jokowi is still unable to solve this matter and to come up with better regulations. In addition, the Singkil incident and others reflect the inability of local administrators to deal with religious diversity, especially in protecting minority rights.

Another example comes from Jakarta. As the capital of Indonesia, Jakarta is a very strategic place from a political point of view. Its significance increased with Jokowi took over as president, following his term as governor of Jakarta. It is important to remember that politics in the Indonesian context usually has used religion as a means to manipulate the masses. Yet Ahok, who succeeded Jokowi as Jakarta’s governor, is an exceptional figure in Indonesian

⁴⁴ Berita Maluku. “Warga Muslim Batu Merah Ambon Sambut Tamu Pesparawi.” October 2, 2015.

<http://www.beritamalukuonline.com/2015/10/warga-muslim-batu-merah-ambon-sambut.html>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

⁴⁵ Ambon Express. “Demi Kerukunan, Ikhlas Berbagi Tempat Tinggal.” August 28, 2015.

<http://ambonekspres.com/2015/08/28/demi-kerukunan-ikhlas-berbagi-tempat-tinggal/>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

⁴⁶ Facebook Page of Rev. Jacky Manuputty

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153688622824697&set=a.10152204280104697.1073741836.642089696&type=3>. Accessed May 25, 2016.

politics: as both a Christian and a Chinese-Indonesian, he belongs to two historically oppressed minority groups, yet he has enjoyed wide popularity. In addition, the relationship between Chinese-Indonesians, or *Tionghoa* people, and other ethnic groups has been improving steadily since President Abdurrahman Wahid abolished discriminatory policies against Chinese-Indonesians in 2001. Therefore, in the smear campaigns against Ahok, his ethnicity as a Chinese-Indonesian is an element, but not as important as his Christian identity. Despite those circumstances, Ahok is still a popular figure in Indonesian politics, not only due to his good track record, but also because of the power of social media. Thus, the smear campaigns against him have not been very effective, especially in Jakarta. In my opinion, this new trend is due to the fact that Indonesians have been exposed to a new pattern of selecting leaders, namely by looking into their programs and actual performances. The electorate's behavior is a good indicator of a stronger democratic society. Social media is playing an important role in these developments, as many people in Indonesia nowadays are actively using social media. The rapid and interactive nature of these media facilitates the spread of accurate, and up-to-the minute information, further enhancing democratic functions.

A further example of positive changes in Indonesia's religious-political life has occurred in Nias, a marginalized region of Indonesia. Unlike Jakarta, it lacks political or economic advantages, and is far from the attentions of national media coverage. It is also one of the few places in Indonesia where Christians constitute the majority and Muslims make up the minority. The work of the Den, as noted above, is not specifically aiming to strengthen interfaith relations. Rather, its purpose is the development of human resources in order to improve education; providing adequate education is a continuous challenge in many places outside of Java. However, through its literacy efforts, the Den has touched on the interfaith issue as well, because they have Muslim volunteers and serve Muslim schools. Theirs is a good example of how civil society groups can tie together and affect with various crucial aspects of daily life: education, economy, politics, religions, and others. We see, thereby, that one cannot place one element, e.g., religion, in an isolated position, making it the only problem, because it is and it always will be connected with other important aspects of society.

Finally, the Mollucans portray another story of violence turning to hope in Indonesia's religious relations. On their island, the numbers of Muslims and Christians are equal, and the Mollucans have experienced a tragic religious conflict that has rendered their multi-religious society vulnerable. Yet, Peace Provocateurs, among other groups, have demonstrated that people at the grassroots level, as well as the government itself, are responsible for building positive interfaith relations. Even though the state of current interfaith relations is not perfect, some recent events, including the ones I have described, demonstrate improvements. Certain strategies used by the Peace Provocateurs have been effective in improving the situation because they touch the needs of its people. By not focusing solely on religion, but actively making interconnections among human a necessities, such as education, public participation, economy, politics, and religion, the Peace Provocateurs has successfully fostered the growth of good interfaith relationships in Maluku.

IV. Conclusion

This analysis of contemporary interfaith relations in Indonesia reveals an ambivalent pattern, contingent on particular loci and their dynamic interconnections. Within the framework of describing the four regions covered in this article, I will close by citing several challenges, and instances of progress, in Indonesia's current interfaith relations.

We know from CSW's report that the government, at both the central and local levels, plays a significant role in the condition of local interfaith relations. Indeed, without the active participation and political will of the government, any efforts to improve interfaith relations in Indonesia will not be very successful. Jokowi's government so far may have improved certain conditions, but it has not helped much with interreligious problems, as proven by the many cases of discord in 2015. The government's lack of active participation in building interfaith relations is the first area in need of attention. Secondly, religion is still narrowly perceived as isolated from other aspects of human life, not interconnected with others. As a result, poor education, poverty, imbalance in economic opportunity, and other issues that are part and parcel of interfaith relations, are treated separately from religious issues. Finally, it is important to note that even if residents of Jakarta seem to be unaffected by the smear campaigns using religion as an issue, the same attacks outside Jakarta can cause real harm, where the politicization of religion is still an effective way to manipulate the masses. In that case, both traditional and social media act as a double-edged sword that can harm or support interfaith relations.

There has been progress, however. First of all, the emergence of local civil society groups is an important factor in promoting peaceful interfaith relations in Indonesia, as demonstrated by the Den, Peace Provocateurs, and other groups across the nation. Local agents are crucial to these efforts, because they know the means that will work well within the particular context of their own regions, cultures, and religions. Secondly, the work of civil society groups will be more effective if the government is willing to support their projects and cooperate with them. Thus, during the Jokowi and Ahok period, Jakarta has been an example of how an extreme religious group like *Front Pembela Islam* can be limited. Its members are still able to publicize their positions, but do not dare to conduct any violent or terrorist actions, due to the existing political structures and government's commitment to upholding the law.

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