

**Tolerating intolerance**  
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MAY was a cruel month for Indonesians trying to do nothing more than worship their god. During an Ascension Day service on May 17th (and again on May 20th), about 100 Protestants were attacked by a Muslim mob at their church in Bekasi on the outskirts of the capital, Jakarta. The mob hurled stones, bags of urine and death threats at the congregation. The church was still only half-built when it was attacked; the pastor has been waiting more than five years for permission from the local district administration to complete it. Since May 2nd local government officials in the ultra-conservative Muslim province of Aceh, in northern Sumatra, have closed at least 16 Christian churches, citing lack of permits.

Such intimidation, and the ongoing rows over permits, are now so commonplace that they are barely reported. On May 26th, however, the issue of religious intolerance in this Muslim-majority nation made international headlines when Islamic hardliners forced the cancellation of a sold-out concert by Lady Gaga, an American pop star. The Islamic Defenders Front (known by its initials in Indonesian, FPI) had threatened to provoke “chaos” if she entered the country. Her promoters said that they could not guarantee her, or her fans’, safety. They were probably right.

Critics argue that these are only the latest incidents in a remorseless rise of religious intolerance, and often violence. Human Rights Watch, a New York-based lobby group, reports that incidents of sectarian violence became “more deadly and more frequent” last year. Islamic hardliners attacked not only Christian churches but also Muslim sects, such as the Ahmadiyah, that they believe to be heretical. The most shocking incident occurred in February last year when a mob of 1,500, stoked up by local FPI leaders, attacked the house of a local Ahmadiyah leader in west Java, killing three people.

The government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has been accused of doing too little to stop such attacks, or to express enough concern about violent Islamic groups. His critics say that he panders to Muslim fundamentalism for political gain, despite his obligations in the constitution to protect freedom of worship. Mr Yudhoyono has dished out cabinet posts in his broad coalition to the leaders of the country’s main Islamic parties.

Certainly, cabinet ministers from the Islamic parties have been less than helpful in promoting Indonesia as the moderate, pluralistic country it claims to be. The religious-affairs minister, Suryadharma Ali, has blamed the Ahmadiyah itself for inviting deadly attacks, saying it had strayed from mainstream Islam. In March he suggested banning women from wearing skirts that were above the knee, calling them “pornographic”. The information minister, Tifatul Sembiring, has made offensive comments about homosexuals.

The president has uttered a few vague public statements about non-violence and respecting other people’s rights, but he has largely left the problem to local governments. This has appeared only to embolden extremist groups, which now feel that they can act with impunity. Sometimes the police are in cahoots with the hardliners. The situation continues to worsen.