

Religion and Society After the Cikeusik Murders

By André Dao



Professor Muhtadi talks about the Cikeusik murders.

On 6 February 2011 three Ahmadiyah Muslims were murdered by a mob in Cikeusik, a small village in the Indonesian province of Banten in West Java. The attacks have brought increased attention to West Java as a region of religious conflict. In conjunction with the Monash School of Political and Social Inquiry, the Castan Centre hosted three educators and religious leaders from West Java to discuss why religious violence has broken out in a region of Indonesia known for its embrace of Western and Islamist modernism.

Dr Julian Millie of the Anthropology section of the Monash School of Political and Social Inquiry introduced the topic and the speakers. He told the audience that 97% of the population of West Java are Muslims, of whom the Sundanese are the ethnic majority. Despite this, Bandung, the capital of West Java, has long been the centre of Western modernism in Indonesia. The first tertiary institution in Indonesia was established in Bandung, and former president Sukarno referred to the city as his passport to a white world. In this context, the low-level violence and intimidation of non-mainstream religious groups, including the Ahmadiyah sect, has caused some confusion among Indonesian commentators. Indeed, the depth of the animosity towards the Ahmadiyah is such that a 2008 law passed by the national government requiring the Ahmadiyah to stop spreading their views and to stop calling themselves Muslims failed to quell anti-Ahmadiyah feeling. The shock of the events in Cikeusik was compounded when the 12 found guilty of the murders were given sentences of between 3 and 6 months.

For Professor Dadang Kahmad, director of Post-Graduate Studies at Islamic State University in Bandung and former West Java chair of Inter-Religious Harmony Forum, the attacks went against the grain of Sundanese culture. According to Professor Kahmad, the dominant Sundanese culture of West Java is generally a kind and friendly one, based on a love for each other. The Ahmadiyah sect has been in West Java since the 1930s with relatively few problems. To explain the change in attitudes, Professor Kahmad argued that it is impossible to understand the religious conflict without reference to the conflict currently occurring between the people and the state. The latter vertical conflict has led to a socio-economic and legal crisis which has eroded people's trust in their government. This alienation fuels what Professor Kahmad called emotional illiteracy – the inability of some Sundanese people to express their anger and frustration in a constructive way, instead turning their anger horizontally towards other social groups.

In a short presentation, Professor Asep Saepul Muhtadi, former Dean in the Faculty of Predication (Dakwah) and Communications at Islamic State University and adviser to the West Java Provincial

Government on social inclusion, spoke more specifically about Cikeusik itself. A small village four hours from Bandung, Professor Muhtadi said that only two houses in the village actually belong to the Ahmadiyah. The immediate cause of the violence was the arrival in Cikeusik of an additional 17 Ahmadiyah Muslims. However, according to Professor Muhtadi, the real cause of the violence is the ideological exclusiveness of Islam. This means that the Sundanese Muslims are unable to accept the divergent beliefs of Ahmadiyah Muslims as a difference of opinion, instead insisting that the Ahmadiyahs are not Muslim at all. Interestingly, Professor Muhtadi also claimed that increased political freedom in the post-New Order era had made the expression of sectarian antipathy more likely.

The final speaker was Mr. Hendar Riyadi, a lecturer at the Islamic State University and a member of the Muhammadiyah Young Intellectuals Network (JIMM). In contrast to the previous speakers, Mr. Riyadi argued forcefully that the attacks in Cikeusik were the manifestation of the Islamic world view in West Java, which he characterised as minimalist and puritanical. In particular, he criticised it for its orientation towards formal doctrinal aspects which leaves West Javanese Muslims incapable of accepting other beliefs. This negative theology offers no compromise or consensus towards pluralism. According to Mr. Riyadi, such a world view leads to fierce reactions when doctrinal positions are challenged by non-mainstream groups such as the Ahmadiyah, whereas the material deprivation of the people is largely ignored. For Mr. Riyadi this is particularly insidious because poverty is ultimately at the heart of religious violence.



Professor Kahmad pauses for the translator.

However, he did end on a more conciliatory note as he acknowledged that there are religious groups in the region which talk about a concept of religion that is inclusive and friendly. Unfortunately, such talk currently seems to be limited to the elites without reaching down to grassroots level. Mr. Riyadi ended by pointing out a weakness in Indonesian civil society that was a common theme throughout the night. Judging by the first hand experience of the three panelists, it seems that until the ostensible political freedom in Indonesia is matched by social and economic equality, political expression will continue to take the form of religious violence displayed so tragically in Cikeusik.

The visit of Professor Kahmad, Professor Muhtadi and Mr Riyadi was supported by the Monash University School of Social and Political Inquiry