

Blocking of the ILGA conference and the rise of hard-line Muslim groups in Indonesia¹

By King Oey²

In recent months Indonesia has been rocked by violent assaults on a variety of minority groups. In almost all cases, the perpetrators came from the FPI (Islamic Defenders Front), a fanatical Muslim group. Indonesia appears to slide back into the chaos of horizontal conflicts, like what happened at the end of 1990s. One of the minority groups targeted is the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender/transsexual) community. It all started with the disbandment of the international conference of ILGA-Asia on 26 March 2010 in Surabaya.

Blocking of the ILGA conference

The rumblings had begun almost a week before the opening. The regional conference of ILGA-Asia was about to be held on March 26-29, 2010, in Surabaya, Indonesia. The news was that Muslim organizations protesting against the conference. There was a snowball effect because more and more public figures were making disapproving statements. The situation became worse when the local police withdrew the permit it initially gave. Without that, the national police also did not want to burn their hands. The hotel also canceled its agreement so the organizers had to find another hotel and move most of its participants.

To avoid a confrontation with either the police or the thugs the organizers officially canceled the conference. But participants were already starting to arrive. This

¹ Paper presented at the Southeast Asia Human Rights Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, 14-15 October 2010.

² Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Arus Pelangi, Indonesia, and member of the ILGA-Asia Regional Board.

put the organizers in a difficult position. Although there would be no meetings, the safety of the participants has to be secured.

The assault came after the Friday noon prayers, where male Muslims are required to pray at the mosques and listen to often fiery sermons. Indeed a mob of 50 angry people arrive at the lobby of the hotel and they were accompanied by a few police intelligence officers. They were later on followed by a demonstration of some hundreds of mostly, Muslim students. The mob represented the FPUI (Unity Front of the Community of Islam), an ad hoc coalition of several Muslim groups. They demanded the immediate leave of the participants from the hotel. The police took the typical attitude of trying to prevent the outbreak of violence and at the same time not being seen as too protective of the LGBT participants and organizers. After a lengthy process of negotiations the agreement was made that the participants would leave as soon as possible. In the course of the following days the militants kept watching over the departure of the participants from the hotel.

Other assaults

This assault on the ILGA conference marked the beginning of a series of assaults on other LGBT gatherings: a Human Rights training for transgender people in Depok, south of Jakarta; an IDAHO (International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia; 17 May) concert in Yogyakarta, and an attack on a HIV-AIDS meeting in Bandung was narrowly averted. The salient thing was that the human rights training was conducted by the National Commission on Human Rights itself. The assault happened on the second day and the program was suspended for a few hours. A reluctant police force had to guard the venue against more attempts of attacks.

LGBT groups were not the only ones targeted, but also other minorities like the Ahmadiyah sect, Christian churches, ex-communists, or place they consider centers of vices: bars, discos and prostitution areas. Their mosques of the Ahmadiyah communities, churches and places of gatherings

As recent as August 2010, members of FPI were implicated in stabbing a Protestant church leader in Bekasi, in the outskirts of Jakarta.

The rise of hard-line Muslim groups

Started in dying days of the Suharto era; some suspect that those groups received encouragement and support from certain quarters in the army and police. While Suharto suppressed fundamentalist Muslim groups just as much as pro-democracy activists, the 'reformation' era saw an upsurge of 'political Islam' and the spread of militant groups in many lower-class neighborhoods. Studies have shown that there is a link between disenfranchised urban poor youth and religious militancy.

FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) is by large the most vocal and violent group with branches in many parts in Indonesia.

Their actions are part of a larger picture where Muslim political parties are trying to assert their power by imposing their paradigms upon the population. This is particularly apparent in areas where the Muslim parties hold a majority in the local parliaments; numerous local ordinances regulating how women should dress, fighting prostitution and other vices have sprung up. Many of those local ordinances include LGBT as part of those vices. At national level, the controversial law of pornography also does the same.

The fight against hard-line Muslims

After the hard-line groups [FPI et al] have gone on a rampaging spree assaulting not only LGBTs but also other minorities for the silliest reasons, the mood in the country has now turned massively against them. More and more people are demanding the government to ban FPI. The internet is here playing a crucial role popularizing through Facebook and other blogsites.

At last, the chief of National Police made two statements [he should have done long ago]: first, he promised that he would not tolerate the FPI staging any raid/assault during the fasting month of Ramadhan³; so far, it he has kept his word because there has been no incident whatsoever. Secondly, in a meeting with the House of Representative on August 28 he actually recommended that FPI be banned, which was subsequently taken

³ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/08/30/fbr-fpi-conduct-107-violence-acts-police-chief.html>

up by several cabinet ministers⁴. The chief of the National Police was among others summoned by the parliament because MPs themselves have become victims of FPI's attacks. The FPI is of course furious but it is clear that they are now cornered. It is likely that the FPI will lie low for the time being as for not to provoke an actual ban by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. This change has become possible by a continued pressure from human rights NGOs [including LGBT organizations] on the various government echelons; the coalition of NGOs had at least two audiences with the chief of national police, before he came out with his statements.

Coalition building by CSOs have proven more effective in the past years. By combining several issues and victim groups of human rights abuses the coalitions can bring up a stronger voice in their lobby work and audiences. There is now a deliberate resolve to bring these matters up to National Commission on Human Rights, National Police Force, House of Representatives, and eventually to the president himself

The discrepancy of government policies is that homosexuality is not officially criminalized, but LGBT are not recognized either by the state. Until now, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights refuses to accept applications for registration by foundations or associations when gays, lesbians etc are mentioned. The current policies leave the door wide open for severe discrimination by some quarters within the government and by the society at large. Most people still associate different sexual orientation and gender identity with deviant behavior. And unfortunately, most people still think that deviant behavior should be repressed, if not punished. And some groups think they can take those matters in their own hands.

The irony is that, essentially, minority groups are pitted against each other, since FPI is a minority group as well. The FPI may claim they have the silent majority behind them, but in fact the majority of the Muslims in Indonesia do not identify themselves with such extremist groups like FPI. The degree of disgust has reached pitch level, especially after the attack on a church service and the stabbing of a Protestant pastor. Will this be a

⁴ <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/indonesian-government-urges-crackdown-on-violent-groups/393727>

turning point? Maybe. But even then, it will not automatically mean that LGBT people will have more room to breathe.

Other strategies include raising the visibility of LGBT in daily as well as public life. This is huge challenge because most LGBT persons still live very much in the ‘closet’. This is slowly changing with the increase of gay-friendly discos and bars, and not the least by the annual Q! Film Festival⁵ being held in six different cities throughout Indonesia.

The civil society can make a difference, as seen in many achievements of democratic space and human right protection in the past 12 years. Roughly speaking, five years ago there was no discourse on rights of LGBT persons in Indonesia. Now, the government cannot ignore it any more. It is a matter of time before it will have to tackle it structurally.

It is paramount for the LGBT rights movement to join the larger human rights movement of the Indonesian civil society. Our demands for non-discrimination and protection are the same as those of many other minorities.

⁵ Q! stands for ‘queer’, another term for LGBT.