



Written by [James Heiser](#) on November 11, 2010

Obama Praises “Toleration” as Indonesian Churches Burn

President Obama’s return to Indonesia, the nation where he spent four years of his childhood, has brought further confusion regarding the response of his administration to the ideology of Islam.



Obama’s tortuous equivocations in Mumbai, India, as he responded to a simple question — [“What is your opinion of Jihad?”](#) — raised again the [spector of Islam](#) that has haunted his administration. Among other points, [as noted by CBS News](#), the visit to Jakarta emphasized the ambiguity of the childhood faith of Barry Sotero (the President’s childhood name):

When he arrived in Indonesia at age 6, he first enrolled in the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School. The headmaster at the school showed CBS News the documents — that “Muslim” was filled in under “religion” in his enrollment papers. School officials say it was standard practice to give the religion of a student’s father, and young Barry’s stepfather was a Muslim.

But it has led some to suggest, erroneously, that the president is a Muslim, even though he’s been a practicing Christian for decades.

However, the comments of President Obama concerning Islam, the dominant religion in Indonesia, are of far greater significance than any speculations regarding his childhood beliefs. Astoundingly, Obama compared Indonesia (a nation that has only recently begun to emerge from being an unabashed dictatorship) to the United States, declaring that the two nations share a spirit of toleration. [As Scott Wilson wrote for the Washington Post](#):

He also praised Indonesia — the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation — for a “spirit of tolerance that is written into your constitution, symbolized in your mosques and churches and temples, and embodied in your people,” a quality worthy for all the world to emulate.

Obama received a warm welcome from the crowd of about 6,500 at the University of Indonesia, particularly when he spoke in Indonesian, as when he recalled buying satay and bakso from street vendors or referenced the national motto, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” or “Unity in Diversity.”

“We are two nations which have traveled different paths. Yet our nations show that hundreds of millions who hold different beliefs can be united in freedom under one flag,” Obama said.

For those Christians whose experience of Indonesian “toleration” is not limited to childhood memories, Obama’s words are likely to elicit sorrow and pain. According to the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum (FKKJ), religious violence has been on the increase since Indonesian independence, and Christians have been the target of much of that violence. [According to an October 26 report at Persecution.org](#):

The latest violent incident occurred in Sukoharjo, Central Java, on Oct. 13, when 12 people on motorcycles set fire to a Protestant church, said Theophilus Bella of the Jakarta Christian



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Communication Forum (FKKJ), which documents sectarian violence in Indonesia. A day before, an attempt to set fire to St. Joseph Catholic church in Klaten, Central Java, was foiled and caused only minor damage, he said in a report made available to *The Jakarta Post*. On Oct. 17, radical Muslims threatened to attack a Catholic church in Karanganyar, Central Java.

Last month, an unidentified group attacked a Catholic church in Pasir regency, East Kalimantan, it said.

Most of the incidents over the last several years took place in Greater Jakarta and West Java, including attacks and forcible church closures that occurred with little or no intervention from the government, the report said....

The FKKJ said religious violence in Indonesia has escalated since the country gained independence in 1945.

Between 1945 and 1967, two churches were set on fire. Between 1967 and 1969, after former president Soeharto took power, 10 attacks were recorded.

Church attacks soared to 460 between 1969 and 1998, after Soeharto's government issued a joint ministerial decree on establishing places of worship, which was seen as favoring the nation's Muslim majority.

After the start of the reform era in 1998, the number of cases skyrocketed to 700, bringing the total number of church attacks between 1945 and 2010 to 1,200.

"It's not wrong to say that Indonesia is the world champion of church burnings," Theophilus said.

Catholic priest Benny Susetyo, executive secretary of the Indonesian Bishops' Council, said that the attacks were due to weak law enforcement.

"Terror has increased due to negligence on the part of law enforcement officials," he said. Benny added that violence against the churches had continued since perpetrators could act with impunity.

It is hard to imagine that President Obama would be praising the tolerance of a Christian nation if it had witnessed the burning of 700 mosques since 1998. However, Obama would search the nations of the West in vain to find one in which violent religious bigotry is tolerated the way it is alleged to have been in Indonesia. [When a mosque was burned in Serbia in 2004](#), eight men were arrested, tried for, and found guilty of, the crime. When a fire damaged equipment at the construction site of [an Islamic center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee](#) this year, officials offered a \$20,000 reward for information regarding the perpetrators, and the FBI considered investigating the incident as a hate crime.

The United States and Indonesia are certainly traveling different paths, and contrary to Obama's "spin," the history of the two nations regarding the relationship between Christians and Muslims and the experience of "religious tolerance" is vastly different. On the eve of Veterans Day, the President's comparison is an offense to the memory of those men and women who have given their lives in defense of a Constitution that enshrines freedom of religion among our most sacred enumerated rights.

Photo of Kare Catholic church burning in Indonesia: AP Images



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