



# God needs no defense

Posted By Endy Bayuni ■ Monday, September 24, 2012 - 4:19 PM



Indonesia ought to be the last country in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to lead a campaign for an international law against blasphemy. It was, after all, one of Indonesia's former presidents, the late Abdurrahman Wahid, who eloquently objected to just such a law. It was Wahid who once famously observed that "**God needs no defense.**"

Yet now it is Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who, responding to the trailer of the anti-Islamic video that has prompted violent protests across the Muslim world, is **taking the initiative** to push for a global protocol banning insults to religion at the UN General Assembly.

The country with the world's largest Muslim population has seen **its share** of angry protests to the film *Innocence of Muslims*, which was produced and released in the United States. But of the several demonstrations that have taken place in Indonesia, only one **outside the U.S. embassy** in Jakarta broke down into clashes with the police. (Eleven officers had to be treated for injuries in that incident.) The others were relatively peaceful.

To his credit, President Yudhoyono was quick **to respond** to the release of the video and the violent protests that it created in much of the Arab world. When he condemned the video and the riots that it had provoked, he reflected the feeling of most Muslims in Indonesia. The government was also quick to demand that Google remove the offending video from YouTube. The film is no longer accessible in Indonesia.

There was no need to go beyond these actions by the government. There was no reason for Indonesians to indulge in the same sort of self-destructive protests that erupted in Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries. Yet on the eve of his departure to New York for the UN General Assembly this week, President Yudhoyono said he planned to propose a law criminalizing blasphemy globally.

He is reviving a **campaign** unsuccessfully waged by the OIC for a time a few years ago. The OIC tried to persuade the UN Human Rights Council to issue a resolution condemning the defamation of Islam. Pakistan, backed by the OIC, led the campaign at the Council in Geneva, and Indonesia supported the motion, though it was never the one to take the initiative.

It is unclear why President Yudhoyono has decided to take the lead this time around. He should have heeded his predecessor Abdurrahman Wahid, who served as president from 1999 to 2001. Wahid repeatedly criticized any attempt to criminalize defamation, in Indonesia or anywhere else in the world.

Wahid, a Muslim cleric by training who was elected Indonesia's third president in 1999, articulated his view of the blasphemy law in an article that became the foreword to a 2011 book by Paul Marshall and Nina Shea titled **Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide**.

"Those who claim to defend God, Islam, or the Prophet are thus either deluding themselves or manipulating religion for their own mundane and political purposes," wrote Wahid, who died in 2009.

The book warns that OIC members are trying to expand blasphemy laws into the Western hemisphere and elsewhere through the United Nations, which, the authors say, would stifle freedom -- and not just in the Muslim world, but also globally.

Indonesia's national blasphemy law does not offer an inspiring precedent. Its law has been used to stifle the diversity of voices from other religions, and even within Islam itself.

The latest victims of the 1965 Blasphemy Law in Indonesia have included the followers of Ahmadiyah and Shiite Islamic sects. The court ruled their teachings to be deviations from Islam,

effectively targeting them for persecution because of their beliefs. An imam who led his congregation to pray in the Indonesian language was sent to jail for "insulting" Islam and a self-confessed atheist is now in jail under the blasphemy law.

A petition to have the law repealed was **defeated** in the Constitutional Court in 2010. The Yudhoyono government joined hands with several major Islamic organizations to defend the law as a means for shielding religion from public ridicule.

Wahid, in his article, addressed the issue of freedom of speech, which many Muslim leaders say has been abused to encourage insults of their God, religion, and the Prophet Mohammed: "Defending freedom of expression is by no means synonymous with personally countenancing or encouraging disrespect towards other's religious beliefs, but it does imply greater faith in the judgment of God, than that of man."

Muslims across the world, as well as in Indonesia, would do well to read Wahid's article and to learn to ignore the insults against Islam, God, and the Prophet. With advances in communication technology, such insults and attacks will be coming more frequently and more fiercely.

The angry reactions seen in much of the Muslim world over these past two weeks not only play straight into the hands of those provocateurs, but also of the extremists in the Muslim world who exploit the anger for their own political interests.

As the Indonesian experience shows, the blasphemy law not only stifles freedom of speech, but it also endangers the freedom of religion for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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