

Indonesia clerics urge end to using term 'infidel'

Term is discriminatory and not in line with country's constitution, gathering of largest Muslim organization told



In this February 2016 file photo, a worker walks past graffiti that reads “Ahok is an infidel” in reference to former Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian who was later jailed for blasphemy. (Photo by Adek Berry/AFP)

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Clerics from [Nahdlatul Ulama](#), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, have issued a call to Muslims to stop branding non-Muslims as “kafir” — infidels.

Their call came at the end of an annual three-day meeting in Banjar, West Java on March 1.

The term ‘infidel,’ discriminates against people of other religions, and is not in accordance with the Indonesian Constitution that recognizes each citizen’s equal status and rights, the meeting was told.

The word “hurts some non-Muslims and is perceived to be theologically violent,” cleric Abdul Moqsith Ghazali said at a forum during the meeting, and which was posted on the organization’s [website](#).

The term was used by the Prophet Muhammad when he preached in Mecca to describe people who worshiped idols and did not recognize scriptures.

However, in Indonesia, its use has become contentious as it has also been used to describe Shia and Ahmadi Muslims in the predominantly Sunni Muslim country.

Jakarta's former Christian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama — known as Ahok — was also often [called an infidel](#) while he was in office and in demonstrations against him before he was jailed for blasphemy.

Instead, Muslims were urged to call non-Muslims *muwathinin*, or citizen, to show people had equal status in Indonesia

Christian leaders backed the NU call.

Reverend Henriette Tabita Lebang, chairwoman of the [Communion of Churches in Indonesia](#), said it would certainly improve interreligious relations in the country.

“This is a positive thing and certainly important because the [excessive] use the term has jeopardized the relationship with [non-Islam] religions,” she said.

“I hope the government also bans the use of the term because Indonesia is a diverse nation,” she said.

Father Antonius Benny Susetyo, a member of a presidential unit promoting communal tolerance, said the call was a response to a joint declaration by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the imam of Al- Azhar, during the papal visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Feb 4.

In the declaration, the religious leaders pledged to work together to reject violence and extremism

“Nahdlatul Ulama wants to uphold that Indonesia is a plural country, a home for all,” Father Susetyo told [ucanews.com](#).

Suhadi Sendjaja, chairman of the Indonesian Buddhist Council also welcomed the call.

“I hope it will help shape the future of our nation,” he said.

However, the call did not please hardliners.

The [Islamic Defenders Front](#), a group criticized for resorting to violence against those who it feels are un-Islamic, criticized Nahdlatul Ulama's stance.

Spokesman, Munarman, denied using the word “infidel” discriminated against or was meant to demean people.

“The term was given by God to humans who refuse to receive Islamic truth through Prophet Muhammad,” Munarman told news portal Tempo.co.

According to, Anwar Abbas, general secretary of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), in Islamic theology, the terms non-Muslim and infidel are equivalent. People who are not Muslim or cannot receive the truth of Islamic teaching are called infidel, he said.

“It is because they reject the truth conveyed by Islamic teaching and prefer their own religion.”

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