

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Independent Churches in Indonesia: Challenges and Innovations**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Indonesia has a Christian community of approximately 23.4 million. This is an estimated 10 percent of its total population.
- The recent growth of independent churches in the country has been significant. An independent church has three characteristics – it is usually led by a charismatic pastor; it has no formal institutional affiliation or religious authority over it, in contrast to the Catholics or Anglicans; and it is therefore able to offer teachings and biblical interpretations based on the understanding or agenda of its leading pastors.
- Independent churches are highly innovative and responsive to societal needs and trends, and are able to attract urban youth and young professionals. A significant number of these churches have links to Singapore megachurches.
- Many have resorted to using auditoriums in shopping malls for worship, for reasons such as added security, good location for urban youth, and circumventing difficulties in obtaining a building permit for their church.
- The churches face rural-based and city-based challenges. Rural-based challenges include protests and resistance from Muslim groups, while city-based challenges are more pervasive and harder to address and include liberal attitudes and progressive lifestyles such as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) issues.

*\* The author is the Lead PI for an on-going Social Science Research Thematic Grant (SSRTG) project entitled “Christianity in Southeast Asia: Comparative Growth, Politics and Networks in Urban Centres”. This Perspective is derived from fieldwork under this project. He is grateful to Hoon Chang-Yau for constructive feedback on an earlier draft. He would also like to thank Evelyn Tan and John Choo for their research support. Terence Chong is Deputy Director of ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Outside the Philippines, Indonesia is home to the largest Christian community in Southeast Asia. The community is a simultaneously a privileged and highly vulnerable one. Relative to other religious communities, Indonesian Christians present an over-representation of wealth, business networks and Chinese entrepreneurs. While the community may not be made up exclusively of ethnic Chinese, the presence of large churches in urban centres attracting middle-class congregations exudes impressions of wealth and affluence.

The community's minority status in Muslim-dominant Indonesia has made it vulnerable to persecution, often culminating in political attacks or violent confrontations. This combination of privilege and vulnerability has shaped the community's character and its relations with the state and the rest of society.

According to official data from 2010, there were approximately 23.4 million Christians making up nearly 10 percent of the total population.<sup>1</sup> Of this, 6.9 million were Catholics while 16.5 million professed to be Protestants.<sup>2</sup> Some studies estimate that 42.8 percent of Chinese Indonesians are Christians, with 27.04 percent of them professing to be Protestants and the remaining 15.76 percent being Catholics.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the Protestants belong to independent churches. Unlike the mainline Methodist, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran denominations which have identifiable doctrines and global institutional hierarchies, independent churches are founded by charismatic individuals who determine the theological direction of their congregation and are not answerable to any other religious authority. Since many of these churches are Pentecostal, Charismatic or evangelical in character, they believe in the gifts of the Spirit, practice speaking in tongues, and place an emphasis on reaching out to the unconverted. The exact number of independent churches is unknown, and statistics suggest that Christian growth is fuelled primarily by the increase in Protestant or Pentecostal independent churches rather than by the Catholic community.

## **WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?**

Independent churches in the region have three main characteristics. Firstly, as mentioned above, they are led by a charismatic senior pastor who may have founded the church. This pastor is often the face of the church and the ultimate authority for all church-related matters. He (and it is primarily a male) is often the reason why congregants choose one church over another. These senior pastors may or may not have prior theological or seminary training. In fact, one recurring feature we have found is the high number of such individuals who have had prior vocations such in engineering, banking, advertising, or business; many of whom may have experienced personal emotional trauma or a low point in their lives, upon which they turned to God for a new life-direction, often resulting in the dedication of their

lives to Christ and the church. Many of these pastors exhibit expansionist visions for their church and a strong entrepreneurial bend, and are likely to equate spiritual growth with material growth.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the financial or numerical growth of their church is interpreted as a sign of God's blessing on them. Crucially, these senior pastors enjoy financial autonomy. Without affiliation to mainline denominations, church funds are free from centralised control, thus giving pastors full discretion over the financial policy and spending of the church (or churches) they preside over.

Secondly, independent churches, as the term implies, have no institutional affiliation or concede to theological authority over them, unlike the Anglican or the Catholic parish which answers to the Church of England or the Vatican, respectively. And while this means that they do not have a global network of resources to tap on, they have become very apt at developing networks and relations with like-minded churches within the country and beyond. For example, several Indonesian independent churches we encountered have links to some of the biggest megachurches in Singapore. Such links include the transnational flow of guest preachers, the Indonesian adoption of the cell group model from Singapore churches, and the appropriation of technologies and practices, which enable more efficient services such as the electronic transfer of tithes. According to a senior pastor, the teaching materials from Singapore are complex and need to be simplified for local congregations, suggesting adoption and adaptation processes between these two cities. Several of the Indonesian pastors we spoke to saw Singapore as an advanced theological hub from which they could learn, thus generating a symbiotic relationship between the independent churches in these two countries.

The church's independence leads to the third, and perhaps most important, characteristic, namely, contextual theologies. Founding pastors are free to forge their particular brand of theology and teaching without interference from an overarching institutional authority. In practical terms, this means being able to interpret the Bible in specific and personal ways; identifying national and/or local needs and addressing them through idiosyncratic readings of the text; and emphasising teachings and values which support the church's theological vision. This leaves them importantly with the ability to be highly responsive to the immediate needs and desires of their congregation and its demographics, and to address the political ever-changing political climate through innovative readings of the Bible.

What this means, on a broad level, is that their Christianity is more dynamic and more relevant in comparison to the mainline denominations. Because they are independent, they reflect a more intuitive Christian response to socio-political trends and challenges. This relevance is also manifested in the personal realm. For example, the founding pastor of one of the largest independent churches in Jakarta told us that "the church is alive to ordinary problems and not [stuck] in doctrinal teachings that people find so alien to their normal lives". Such being the case, independent churches are becoming more and more central to the private lives and identities of their congregants. Unlike mainline denomination churches which are Sunday institutions, the teachings of independent churches and personality of

their pastors are increasingly interwoven into members' lives through cell group meetings and social networking.

Another reason for the growing importance of independent churches is their ability to attract urban youth and young professionals. While there are no reliable statistics on demographics, our ethnographic observation and discussions with pastors suggest that it is younger Indonesians who are drawn to these churches, especially in urban centres. There are several reasons for these, including highly relevant teachings, fast-paced praise and worship sessions, and convenient venues such as shopping malls. Other interesting innovations include Gereja Satu Jam Saja's one hour service in two shopping malls in Surabaya. This church has one-hour services running from 10am to 7pm, akin to multiple movie screenings at cinemas, where members can choose to attend a service at any time that is convenient to them. Strategically based in large shopping malls such as Ciputra World Mall, they are designed to offer the Christian experience between shopping rounds, shaping the Christian experience of younger Indonesians in profound ways.

### **HOW ARE THEY ESTABLISHED?**

The establishing of a church is relatively straightforward in Indonesia. In order to register itself officially, the church has to first acquire membership to a synod. The new church seeks a synod that is most compatible with its teachings, values, and interpretations of the Bible. Membership to a synod may require fees or representation at council meetings, or both, depending on the synod. These synods serve as filters to ensure that churches within their fold espouse teachings and values that are not detrimental to Indonesian society. Only with synod membership can the new church approach the Ministry of Religious Affairs for formal registration.<sup>5</sup> Churches such as Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia and International Full Gospel Fellowship in Jakarta, and Masa Depan Cerah and Gereja Mawar Sharon in Surabaya are among the few large enough to have their own synods. Others include the Bethel Church of Indonesia and the Batak Christian Protestant Church, which have their own governing synods and thousands of churches under them. Because of the sheer size of such churches, scholars have described them as "streams" or "aliran" (ecumenical trend), from which charismatic pastors may seek to break away from, in order to form their own independent churches.<sup>6</sup> Once official registration with the Ministry has been approved, the church may begin to conduct services and other related activities.

The physical construction of a church is a more complicated affair. Since the Joint Ministerial Decree of 21 March 2006, it has become mandatory for all religions, including Christianity, wishing to build a place of worship to apply for a building permit or *Izin Mendirikan Bangunan* (IMB). IMB application requires the church to submit to the municipal government a name list with at least 90 congregants, providing their identity card numbers; at least 60 signatories from the local community (who are not Christians) who agree to the building of the church in their neighbourhood; written recommendation from

the municipal head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; and written recommendation from the municipal head of the Religious Harmony Forum (Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama). Many churches fall at this hurdle.

Our research suggests that a successful IMB application or having a church already constructed is no guarantee of community acceptance. A senior pastor of an independent church in Jakarta whom we interviewed spoke of the arduous process of attaining a list of 60 signatories. The eventual submission of this list did not signal the end of his difficulties. After his church was built he received a visit from a group of Muslims, including leaders from a nearby mosque, who were upset with the size of the church's cross at the top of the building even though it had been indicated in the original blueprint. The group demanded that the cross be torn down or covered with a black cloth. The matter was eventually resolved after further discussions with the local authorities. In such cases, while IMB may have been granted, community approval often proves to be more fluid, hinging perhaps on the visual and physical impact of the completed church or the crowds it draws.

## **THE INTERTWINING OF RELIGIOUS AND RETAIL SPACES**

The difficulty in applying for IMB has resulted in one of the defining characteristics of independent churches, namely, the intertwining of religious and retail spaces. Our respondents note that shopping malls in urban centres are preferred by independent churches. According to a US-educated ethnic Chinese Christian leader from Jakarta, Praise Community Church, which is located in mall in Jalan Casablanca, south Jakarta and which draws in large numbers of ethnic Chinese, there are at least three reasons for this. Firstly, auditoriums and halls in shopping malls are ready-made venues for large numbers of people. With large car parks and escalators and wide corridors, they facilitate large flows of people. Secondly, they are also conveniently located in retail spaces where younger congregants gather anyway. And thirdly, many of these malls have their own security. In addition, being surrounded by retail shops and other businesses offers a sense of reassurance that a standalone church in a Muslim-majority neighbourhood lacks. The Christian leader notes that "Muslim radicals are much less likely to protest outside [shopping malls] to demand that developers to close down the mall". Such retail and highly secular spaces, far from weakening the church, actually offer refuge from hostile groups in multicultural societies in the country. In addition to retail spaces, these churches also prefer to be located in business areas and assiduously avoid residential areas for fear of open opposition.

The intertwining of retail and religious spaces is also noticed in Singapore. However, the Singapore model differs from that in Jakarta and Surabaya in that independent churches in Singapore are often compelled to use non-traditional spaces such as old movie theatres, hotel ballrooms or auditoriums because of limited land. Not only do they have to compete with other mainline denominations for sites that have been designated 'Place of Worship' under the state's urban master plan, but also with other religious groups such as Muslims,

Hindus and Buddhists as well. As such, many have resorted to using commercial or industrial buildings. A handful of Singapore megachurches are wealthy enough to become major stakeholders in such retail and commercial buildings. Government guidelines, however, limit the religious use of such buildings to 10,000 square metres and prohibit public displays of religious iconography such as crucifixes or biblical depictions.

The reasons and motives for this practice clearly vary in the region. There is an instinctive turn to capitalist practices and commercial spaces when the state (Singapore) or other religious groups (Indonesia) do not allow for independent churches to construct buildings for themselves. Be that as it may, in all cases, retail comes to the aid of religion.

### **THE RURAL-CITY CHALLENGES**

In conclusion, numerous interviews with pastors and congregation members from independent churches in Jakarta and Surabaya show that there are two types of perceived challenges. They may be defined as rural-based and city-based challenges. According to several respondents, rural-based challenges faced by the church are usually oppositional in nature. A senior pastor from Masa Depan Cera notes that churches in rural or remote areas are more vulnerable to protests and resistance from Muslim groups, and that many such events go unreported by the media. Another pastor from Gereja Orang Beriman suggests that this is because rural communities tend to be smaller, thus ensuring that anything foreign to the community is immediately noticed and deemed a threat to their way of life.

On the other hand, city-based challenges faced by independent churches are more pervasive and harder to address. The Masa Depan Cera senior pastor explains that city-based churches have to deal with increasingly liberal attitudes and with progressive lifestyles such as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) issues. Unlike instances of violence directed against the church which can be easily condemned, he believes that it is difficult for the church or Christians to openly condemn gay marriages or the LGBT community because they would be criticized by the international community for intolerance and bigotry. A young pastor from Surabaya's Gereja Satu Jam Saja suggests that city-based churches face fewer Muslim demonstrations compared to those in rural areas because the former can hire the police or army to ward off protesters.

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<sup>1</sup> Kewarganegaraan, Suku Bangsa, Agama, Dan Bahasa Sehari-Hari Penduduk Indonesia: Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010 (Jakarta: Badan Pusat Statistik, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ananta, Aris, Evi Nurvidya Arifin, M. Sairi Hasbullah, Nur Budi Handayani, and Agus Pramono. "Changing Ethnic Composition: Indonesia, 2000–2010." Paper presented in the XXVII IUSSP International Conference, Busan, August 26–31, 2013.

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.693.2147&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>4</sup> For more on the leadership of megachurches, see ISEAS Perspective (Issue 2015; No. 53).

[https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2015\\_53.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_53.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Religious Affairs was set up in 1946 “to soothe the Islamists’ political anxiety” over the establishment of Pancasila which “was viewed as a victory for secular nationalists and moderate Muslims” (Seo 2013:49). However, the Ministry soon comprised three departments overseeing Islam, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism, with Hindu-Buddhism added later. The Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for the regulation and approval of religious growth in Indonesia.

<sup>6</sup> In discussion with Hoon Chang-Yau.

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