

## **Indonesia's Muslim schools draw Christians**

By Izza Rohman

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Jakarta – Where can one find schools run by a Muslim organisation, the majority of whose students are non-Muslims?

Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia are too often associated with conflict, disharmony and hostility, thus, it might be surprising for many to learn that such schools exist in different parts of Indonesia.

In some Christian Indonesian enclaves, Muhammadiyah (literally the followers of the Prophet Muhammad), one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisations, have established a number of schools where, in a few cases, 50 to 75 per cent of students are Christian.

This interesting phenomenon is found on some islands of Indonesia, for instance in the predominantly Catholic town of Ende on the island of Flores in the south-eastern part of Indonesia, and the predominantly Protestant town of Serui on the smaller island of Yapen in the eastern part of the country.

This point is highlighted by Dr Abdul Mu'ti, senior lecturer at Walisongo State Institute for Islamic Studies in Semarang, Central Java, who conducted field work in some of these areas. His findings were presented recently at the International Research Conference on Muhammadiyah held recently in the University of Muhammadiyah in Malang, East Java.

Christian parents in fact, frequently make the decision to send their children to Muhammadiyah schools because of the high quality education and low cost, as well as the fact that the schools provide Christian religious education. They choose to provide the opportunity for their children to interact with Muslims, despite the availability of nearby Christian schools, for example in the case of Ende.

This implies that these Christian communities trust such institutions. They are unconcerned that learning in a Muslim school would pose a threat to their children's religious beliefs. In fact, they do not see the religious difference as a problem and even highlight similarities among religions.

"Islam and Catholicism have many things in common. Both seek the good in people," said a devout Catholic parent in Ende. Some parents see interfaith interaction, as well as the Islamic characteristics of the school, as something positive that state-run or other private schools do not offer.

Both the Muhammadiyah Senior High School in Ende and the Muhammadiyah Junior High School in Serui provide Christian students with a Christian religious education course taught by a Christian teacher.

Indeed, in the Ende school, the course has been offered since 1971, long before the Indonesian law requiring such a class was issued in 2003.

In both schools, not only can one find Christian instructors teaching Christian religious education classes, but also Christian instructors teaching other subjects to Christian and Muslim students alike. These teachers find the experience of working in Muslim schools helps them better understand Islam and Muslims, a view shared by most of the students.

As Mu'ti's survey shows, both Christian and Muslim students consider the experience in a multi-faith environment is remarkably helpful for building religious harmony.

Instead of being a source of religious tensions, the existence of schools run by Muslim organisations like Muhammadiyah has proven to bridge different religious communities, functioning as a safe space for interfaith encounters.

With young people growing in an environment characterised by peaceful religious cohabitation in Muslim-run schools in Indonesia's Christian enclaves and elsewhere, one can hope for a more tolerant, inclusive, peaceful world – a better place to live for all.

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