

Qanun and House of Worship Conflict: The Irony of the Aceh Government in Aceh Singkil

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Abstract

Resolving the conflict over the legality of the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Aceh Singkil is not an easy matter, especially after the burning of 1 church and the demolition of 9 churches in 2015. The existence of Christian congregations that continue to grow is a 'time bomb' in the future, considering that not a single church has received its license to date. This research aims to place the 'real' phenomenon (the latest motive) behind the non-approval of permits for the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Aceh Singkil. This research is an output of the Research Organization for Science and Social Humanities (OR IPSH) Program House of the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in collaboration with PTKIN Aceh Lecturers. This research is classified as field research with a qualitative approach. The methodology used is a phenomenological study and ethnographic study. Data collection was done through interviews and Qanun observations. The study found that church burning is not a religious conflict but a conflict of political interests. Politicians deliberately maintain religious conflicts (always exist) to obtain majority votes. Second, the motive for not issuing permits for the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship is a hypocritically packaged 'hands-off policy'. Through Qanun's affirmation, the executive does not want legality to be issued when they take office.

Keywords: *Aceh Qanun, House of Worship, Aceh Singkil.*

Introduction

A conflict that occurred in Aceh Singkil, namely the burning of houses of worship (churches), became alarming news in the media. There was even a casualty (1 person) from Muslims when the Christians tried to refuse their house of worship to be destroyed by the masses. The impact of this incident is that, to this day, there has not been a single church that has obtained legality or permission to build a house of worship. (Pratiwi, 2020). The legality of establishing houses of worship has a clear foundation and is even protected by law.

What happened in Aceh Singkil that reflects that the legality of establishing houses of worship, especially to maintain the principles of justice and human rights (in religion), must be maintained and considered. It can be an evaluation of regional leaders in preventing inter-religious conflicts in any region of Aceh. As it is realized, although Aceh has a dominant Muslim population, the existence of non-Muslims cannot be ignored because Islam is a teaching that brings grace, including how to respond to coexistence with adherents of other religions.

In fact, in the problem of houses of worship, religious assemblies facilitated by the government (Ministry of Religion) have formulated a Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs, Number 9 and 8 of 2006. However, issuing a Joint Regulation of the Ministers does not mean that the problem of establishing houses of worship has been solved; it can be seen from violating a Joint Regulation of the Ministers. This series of problems began with Aceh's condition, which received special autonomy rights after the peace between GAM and RI in 2006. Furthermore, Governor Regulation Number 25 of 2007 concerning Guidelines for establishing Houses of Worship in Aceh was born. (Tobroni, 2021a).

The governor's regulation (Pergub) is a derivative of the Joint Regulation of the Ministers, one of whose articles contradicts the Joint Regulation of the Ministers, namely the addition of requirements on 'the

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number of prospective users of the establishment of houses of worship claimed by the Muslim majority population violates the agreement.' In the Joint Regulation of the Ministers, the number of users of houses of worship is at least 90 people. The local community supports 60 people (a Joint Regulation of the Ministers Article 14 (2) letters a and b). Aceh Governor Regulation No. 25/2007 requires 150 users and 120 supporters from the local community. Although this Aceh Governor Regulation has a clear legal umbrella, Law No. 11 of 2001 has more validity than the Joint Regulation of the Ministers. The misunderstanding in implementing the Joint Regulation of the Ministers and Qanun above often triggers conflict over the legality of establishing houses of worship in Aceh.

Of course, this is not an easy issue, let alone talking about houses of worship with two major regulations: the state perspective and Aceh's qanun. This regulation must be respected; denying the Aceh Qanun will also be a problem, but letting non-Muslim communities not have houses of worship is also not the best solution. So the important thing to do is that all parties, including the government, the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), related parties of each religion, and community leaders, must maintain and respect freedom of religion and be able to accept the existence of plural life in Aceh society. (Pikahulan, 2023).

So far, the conflict over the legality of the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship is less obvious than in Aceh Singkil. However, over time, the non-Muslim population will increase. When that number crosses the threshold of requirements in the Qanun, this is where the potential for religious conflict based on the legality of the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship will occur in Aceh. The gap between national regulations and Aceh's Qanun is like a time bomb that will explode if not addressed and anticipated early on.

This article aims to situate the objective phenomenon behind the non-approval of the permit to build a non-Muslim house of worship in Aceh Singkil. Previous research has been subjective, involving the religious identity of the researcher. Christian researchers, in general, describe the results of their research that Muslims in Aceh have acted intolerant and discriminatory. The Acehnese Muslim researchers, on the other hand, described the conflict as a result of the Christians violating the old agreement.

Likewise, with the author's initial exploration results, the executive party represented by Muslims explained that the permit to establish houses of worship could not be issued because the Christians had not fulfilled the requirements of the Aceh Qanun. The Christians claimed that the government deliberately made it difficult for the permit to build a house of worship even though the requirements set by the Qanun had been fulfilled before. Not only that, when the Christians raised the case at the provincial level, even the national level, there was no serious response as if the 'right to religion' was no longer valid. This phenomenon is a serious problem that needs to be solved.

Literature Review

The legality of the establishment of houses of worship, a Joint Regulation of the Ministers 2006, and Qanun Aceh on the establishment of houses of worship is not new; several authors have studied and researched it. Febriawati and Herdiani have researched "*Analysis of the Polemics of Disparity of Christians in Aceh Against the Regulation of the Establishment of Places of Worship.*" The work is significant and very good in mapping the problems of establishing places of worship in Aceh. Although they both discuss religious conflicts due to places of worship, the work does not deeply examine Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016 concerning Guidelines for Maintaining Religious Harmony and Establishment of Places of Worship. (Febriawati & Herdiani, 2021).

Aulia Hestiyara, in work entitled; "*The Effectiveness of the Implementation of Requirements for the Establishment of Houses of Worship Based on Applicable Legislation,*" has systematically explored how the impact and influence of changes in the requirements for the establishment of houses of worship in Indonesia. The research narrates the advantages and disadvantages of changing standards for religious adherents, especially minorities. Aulia's work has similarities with what the author is researching, especially in the context of dissecting and exploring regulations related to permits for the establishment of houses of worship in Indonesia. (Hestiyara, 2021). As for the difference, Aulia did not specifically examine the Aceh Qanun and

only focused on describing national regulations.

Pratiwi, in her research entitled; *"Interfaith-Conflict Dialogue: The Way to Peace in the Islamic-Christian Conflict in Aceh Singkil in 2015,"* has given many insights to readers on how the method of resolving religious conflicts in Aceh through deliberation and consensus approaches. (Pratiwi, 2020). The similarity between Pratiwi's work and the author's research is the background dimension that departs from changes in the National Joint Regulation of the Ministers, Pergup Aceh, and Aceh Qanun related to houses of worship. As for the difference, if Pratiwi focuses on describing solutions in the medium of deliberation, the author is more focused on finding political aspects on behalf of Qanun Aceh.

Faiq Tobrani, in his research entitled; *"Local-Sharia Regulations and Religious Expression in Aceh: Criticism of the Qanun about Establishing Places of Worship,"* has discussed very well how criticism of the legality of the establishment of houses of worship based on local policies in Aceh. Faiq's work has similarities with the author's research in the context of the Aceh Qanun regulation, which is used as the primary object of research. (Tobroni, 2021). As for the significant difference, if Faiq is more intense in dissecting the implementation of Qanun in several Acehnese locations, the author is more focused on analyzing Qanun Rumah Ibadah, which is used as a medium in complicating the issuance of church establishment permits in Aceh Singkil.

After exploring and reviewing several similar scientific works, the author's observation has not found a single work that thoroughly describes the author's title variable. It shows that the title the researcher proposes is original, authentic, and has a *research gap*, so it is worth continuing. As for the novelty, the author raises the politics of qanun affirmation, where the qanun is politicized by the Aceh Government as if it is a solution to the conflict, even though the qanun is a problem that closes the opportunity for solutions (hypocrisy).

Research Method

This research is classified as field research with a qualitative approach. The methodologies used are phenomenological and ethnographic. Data collection is done through interviews and observations of Qanun. The primary sources of this research are Aceh Qanun No. 4/2016 on Guidelines for the Maintenance of Religious Harmony and the Establishment of Places of Worship, Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Governor Regulation No. 25/2007 on Guidelines for the Establishment of Houses of Worship, and the 2006 Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Home Affairs. Other primary sources are interviews with the executive and legislative branches of Aceh Singkil, FKUB, clerics, intellectuals, Christian pastors, Christian congregations, Catholic congregations, and Muslim congregations. Meanwhile, secondary sources are literacy studies such as scientific journals published in the last five years.

Finding and Discussion

Qanun and House of Worship Conflicts

The Qanun on establishing houses of worship in Aceh (2016) is a development of the Aceh Governor's regulation in 2007 after being reconditioned due to the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Aceh Singkil in 2015. Although many churches were demolished during the conflict, the Muslim side lost one life (died) after physical contact between Muslims and Christians ahead of the regional elections in Aceh Singkil. This conflict was not purely caused by religious motives but rather by political movements and political promises that were temporal (Gea et al., 2022).

In short, the previous Regent candidate promised that the legality of church establishment would be carried out in Aceh Singkil if elected as Regent. However, after the person concerned succeeded in office, the promise was not realized, making the Christians build houses of worship independently (illegal) (Syarif, 2023). The construction did not get complaints and rejection from the local community (sub-district where

the church was established). The rejection came from other areas after being triggered by political interests as well.

Another Regent candidate, on behalf of the Dayah Ulama, demanded that the elected Regent curb the construction of churches in Aceh Singkil. A mass gathering occurred and targeted the Aceh Singkil Regent's Office as the location of the mass rampage. However, on the way, since the location to the Regent's Office passed several churches. These masses overflowed their anger (provoked), turned directions (not towards the Regent's office), and destroyed the church (Aritonang, 2021). (Aritonang, 2021). Passive Christians prefer to save themselves, including Catholic officials (priests). They even instructed residents to go out of town to find a safe refuge.

As for the fanatical Christians, they followed the instructions of their religious leaders (pastors) to fight the mob at all costs. It even includes bloodshed. Finally, a conflict that led to physical contact ensued. Dozens of people were injured, and even one person from the Muslim community died. However, the resistance impacted the church, which survived the rampage (not burned).

Based on the above incident, the Christians took various ways to obtain legality (permission) to establish their church. They took all means, including writing to President Jokowi and asking for help from international human rights protection and the international church. Seeing that the fanatical Christians are increasingly aggressively breaking through various methods, the Aceh Government issued "Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016 concerning Guidelines for Maintaining Religious Harmony and Establishing Places of Worship" as a solution (Tobroni, 2021). In the Qanun, there are changes to the mechanism and requirements, especially the increase in users and non-users. However, suppose the requirements for users and non-users are met in the Qanun. In that case, the Aceh government will facilitate other requirements (such as land, buildings, and church locations).

Qanun on Houses of Worship and the Politics of Affirmation

Aceh's Qanun on establishing houses of worship is a derivative of the 2006 Joint Regulation of the Ministers related to establishing houses of worship in national regulations. The difference is that there are revisions and additional requirements in the Aceh Qanun because Aceh is an Islamic law area. Although this is a religious reason, the reality is political and has aspects of interest. The enactment of the Aceh Qanun on Houses of Worship was the Aceh Government's response to the special incident in Aceh Singkil in 2015.

Related to the permit for establishing non-Muslim houses of worship in Aceh, the Aceh Qanun on Houses of Worship has an essence whose points are more stringent for non-Muslims in carrying out administrative and recommendation requirements. The unique difference is that while the 2006 Joint Regulation of the Ministers narrates regulations for all religions, the Aceh Qanun imposes strict standards only on non-Muslims (Husaidi et al., 2020). As for the conditions, as stated in the Aceh Qanun on Houses of Worship, non-Muslims have general provisions, including *First*, based on real needs by considering the quantity and percentage of the population in a location in Aceh. This section narrates that the proposal for establishing non-Muslim houses of worship must be real (real needs) that are not commercial or political.

In addition, the establishment permit has a special condition of 'consideration of the situation', which means that if there is an uproar in the agenda of establishing non-Muslim houses of worship in Aceh, the local government is obliged to delay or stop the establishment program. As a leader, the narrative should not be written according to local regulations. There should be a more moderate description, especially in describing the consequences fairly (middle way). The existence of 'one-sided' regulations will be twisted by all parties to worsen the situation. Worse, regulations like this are not what the Muslim community wants in the TKP (the neighborhood where the church was established) but what the government wants behind their political needs. It is proven by the harmony between Muslims and Christians in the TKP, even though they help each other in various social practices. Likewise, when Christian worshippers carry out worship in churches that are not yet legal, local Muslims are very tolerant and do not interfere with each other.

Friction and conflict begin to occur during the momentum of Pilkada or Pileg. Even then, it is due to political figures who utilize religious differences to obtain votes. This situation occurred in Banda Aceh when Illiza Saaduddin Jamal served as Mayor. At that time, non-Muslim parties had carried out all administrative requirements related to the construction of a church around the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. However, given the mass upheaval that rejected it collectively, the effort to build a church had to be canceled even after the Mayor at that time allowed it. (Juwaini et al., 2021). Even so, this does not mean that churches do not exist in Banda Aceh. There are already several churches, one only about 100 meters from the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. The difference is that the church is rumored to be built very close to the mosque, facing each other. This consequence led to the rejection of Banda Aceh Muslims even though there was indeed mass or political mobilization behind it.

When talking more narrowly related to the legality of the establishment of houses of worship, there is a politics of affirmation between every element of government in Aceh, both the local government (Aceh Singkil) and the Aceh provincial government. Affirmation politics is an approach or policy designed to provide special support or assistance to groups historically facing discrimination or inequality in society. The aim is to create more equitable and just conditions for these groups by providing better access to economic opportunities, education, employment, or other resources. In the context of affirmative action politics, governments or public institutions may adopt policies such as quotas in education or employment, special economic assistance programs, or support in the development of small and medium enterprises for certain groups. However, this approach is often controversial as some consider it reverse discrimination.

Likewise, in Aceh Singkil, the government seems afraid of reverse discrimination, so the existing discrimination is maintained. By discriminating against minority groups, it will gain support from Muslims as the majority. This support is certainly very much maintained by the government, especially in maintaining the stability of their political arena. Furthermore, this affirmation politics requires media, while the media used is Aceh Qanun No. 4/2016 concerning Houses of Worship. The points of this qanun are deliberately packaged in such a way as both the essence of its content and its implementation. Formally, this qanun is issued as a solution to conflicts over houses of worship. However, in reality, this qanun is like a punishment for Christians in conflict with Muslims. The following table illustrates the significant differences between a Joint Regulation of the Ministers and Qanun;

| a Joint Regulation of the Ministers 2006 No. 8/9 Year 2006 | Aceh Qanun No. 4 Year 2016 |
|---|---|
| The area limit to qualify 1 house of worship is a sub-district, if it is not enough then it is calculated as 1 regency or Province. | The boundary is only the sub-district. Other sub-districts may not assist with administrative support |
| User support of 90 people | User support of 140 people |
| Non-user support of 60 people | Non-user support of 110 people |
| Recommendation of FKUB, and Regency/City Department of Religious Affairs | Recommendations from geuchik, imam mukim, sub-district head, Office of Religious Affairs, FKUB, and Ministry of Religious Affairs at the district/city level. |
| Recommended format to customize | Recommendations are independent of each other |
| No picture design required | Building drawing plan approved by authorized technical official |
| Not required to have a board decree | Decree of the management of the house of worship issued by the authorized official |
| If the requirement for the number of users is met, while the other requirements are not, then the government determines and facilitates the location of the house of worship. | If the requirement for the number of users is met, and the requirement for the number of non-users is met, while the other requirements are not, then the government determines and facilitates the |

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| | location of non-Muslim houses of worship. |
| ID card is not required for 1 person for 1 house of worship | ID card can only be submitted for 1 house of worship |
| Submitted by the founding committee to the Regent/Mayor to obtain IMB for the House of Worship. | Submitted by the founding committee to the Regent/Mayor to obtain a permit to establish a house of worship. |
| Provincial capitals have the same requirements as capitals in other districts | For the capital city of Aceh (Banda Aceh), the permit must be addressed to the Governor of Aceh. |
| Results will only be given if accepted, if rejected then told to complete the missing requirements | Results are issued in 3 options: Acceptance, Suspension, or Rejection |
| Not mentioned | Governors and Regents/Mayors are obliged to curb and prohibit the use of buildings that do not have IMB for the establishment of houses of worship. |
| All articles of the 2006 a Joint Regulation of the Ministers apply to all religions | Provisions related to permits and requirements for the establishment of houses of worship do not apply to Muslims in Aceh. |

Perspective Dualism: Outsider and Insider

The author's analysis related to the existence of Qanun Aceh and the establishment of houses of worship has two major perspectives. The first is the *insider*, namely the party that formulated the Qanun, including the Muslim community in Aceh. Second is the *outsider*. It is the non-Muslim community, especially Christians, who are most often in conflict with local regulations in Aceh. For *insiders*, the Aceh Qanun on the legality of establishing houses of worship is very important and under local wisdom. Aceh is an area of Islamic law. Therefore, if the portions of the Aceh Qanun are considered to have a weight that leans towards Muslims, then that is the right and authority of the Aceh Government as a region with special autonomy from the center. (Akbar & Abidin, 2018). The Government of Aceh formulated Qanun Aceh, which has stricter administrative procedures for non-Muslims in establishing houses of worship, as a form of joint consideration after the riots in Aceh Singkil in 2015.

As far as the author's analysis goes, there is no religious conflict in Aceh that is more phenomenal than what happened in Aceh Singkil. The case was very unfortunate because it resulted in 1 church being burned and claimed the life of 1 person. At another point, the rejection of the establishment of the church also occurred in Banda Aceh. However, the incident was quickly muted so that it did not cause more serious problems. Regarding the legality of establishing houses of worship, the Aceh government, in this case, the Governor of Aceh, is the highest authority on whether a non-Muslim house of worship in Aceh can be established.

Regarding the number of recommendations that are more in the Aceh Qanun than the Joint Regulation of the Ministers' national regulation, it was also done by the Aceh Government based on consideration of the treasures of Islamic law in Aceh, which has many structures in the management of religion issues in Aceh. For example, the Office of Religious Affairs includes religious instructors who intensively socialize the importance of religious harmony and tolerance in Aceh. Through the Office of Religious Affairs recommendation, a map of analysis will be found that a location where a non-Muslim house of worship is established has a community that is ready or not to coexist with a non-Muslim house of worship (Gerung & Mantu, 2021).

The same goes for the recommendations of the Keuchik, Imam Mukim, Sub-district Head. All of these elements have separate analyses and are considered representatives who understand the condition of the

community layer. According to the basic instructions in the Aceh Qanun on Houses of Worship, establishing non-Muslim worship houses depends on the surrounding community's condition, especially in maintaining religious harmony. That means if there is still a rejection, the permit to establish a non-Muslim house of worship will be suspended or rejected (JU, Resident interview, 2020).

Regarding the prohibition of interfaith religious proselytizing, what the Aceh Government has done is to anticipate the rise of Acehnese apostates. The *Qanun Jarimah Murtad* (the crime of apostasy) has emphasized the regulation of the Qanun that discusses the da'wah guidelines. This Qanun regulates matters related to the preservation of aqidah in Aceh, such as the influence of non-Muslims or cults in the name of Islamic teachings. The author's analysis once found one of the residents in Aceh Singkil who claimed to change religion (apostate) because of political needs.

The apostate converted to get around the administrative requirements that could not be fulfilled and register himself as a *Keuchik* candidate. As is known, specifically in Aceh, if people want to become a *Keuchik* (the village head), they must be able to read the Qur'an. Since the apostate above was not illiterate, he changed his religion (from Islam to Christianity). The incident exposed him to the criminal provisions of the Aceh Qanun on the Safeguarding of Aqidah. The person concerned was reported and threatened with 60 lashes of flogging (Zulkarnaini et al., 2023).

It is a different story if the Aceh Qanun on Houses of Worship is viewed from *an outsider's* perspective. For Christians, especially in the zone where the church burning occurred (Aceh Singkil), they consider that Aceh Qanun No. 4 of 2016 is a doorstep that closes the opportunity for churches in Aceh Singkil to obtain legality rights. For them, even for a lifetime, the requirements issued by the Aceh Government will not be met. For information, to this day, not a single church has legal status in Aceh Singkil. Several churches there have been established for quite a long time and even existed before the 2006 Aceh Qanun and a Joint Regulation of the Ministers.

So, it is not surprising that the officials there are trying to take other paths to obtain the legality of the church establishment. The reason is that they have implemented all the requirements and procedures stipulated by Aceh Qanun No. 4/2016. However, to this day (about eight years), there is no bright spot regarding several churches that have been submitted for legality permits. The Aceh Qanun informs that the government must respond within 90 days. According to information the author obtained from the Province, the Governor of Aceh suspended the legality permit. The reason is that if the legality is issued, it will trigger religious conflicts in Aceh Singkil.

In another analysis, the author considers there were concerns from officials during his time as if they were instructing him that the permit should not be issued during his tenure. It will be imprinted and become its fear, especially the narratives about the permission to establish houses of worship in Aceh Singkil are very sensitive. Realizing this condition, the pastors and Christian officials in Aceh Singkil tried to contact President Jokowi, the Central Human Rights Commission, and the Minister of Home Affairs. They even deliberately made a viral video about the poor condition of their church abroad. Even so, the center still struggled to respond to the various movements. The reason is that Aceh has a special contract to implement internal affairs through the Helsinki MoU.

The author considers that it is natural for outsiders to oppose the contents of Aceh Qanun No. 4/2016. Subjectively, it harms them regardless of the reasons and conditions. Nevertheless, local wisdom is something that should be preserved and respected. The condition of Aceh today is a fact that will also occur in other regions if they are the majority. Papua, for example, is a clear example of the opposite of Aceh. In the same year (2015), a mosque in one of the districts in Papua was burned down when it was about to perform Eid prayers. Muslims who were praying at the time were forced to secure themselves to the nearest Kodim. (Ridwan, 2018).

What happened in Papua is a reflection of the majority of Christianity. Various authorities and solutions proposed in the end still follow local wisdom; namely, Muslims in Papua must be patient and keep themselves from offending non-Muslim sentiments related to houses of worship. Likewise, although

various socializations regarding religious tolerance have been carried out in Aceh, proportional justice will still be difficult to implement in homogeneous areas, unlike the big city areas where the people are heterogeneous. Call it big cities like Jakarta, Medan, Bandung, and Surabaya. These cities are more moderate and accept the existence of other people.

Aceh Government Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy in this context comes from the word 'hypocrite', which means dualism of attitude. One side supports A but, on the other hand, does not support what A is asking for. (Viani, 2019). So is the phenomenon that occurred in Aceh Singkil related to the establishment of houses of worship. When the government faced the request of the Christian side, they acted gently, as if the legality permits were being processed properly as they should have been. There is a very massive instruction not to reach the final stage, namely issuing a house of worship establishment permit. All processes that are passed always have gaps and shortcomings; in the end, the Aceh Qanun becomes a scapegoat as if the Qanun will never allow non-Muslims to obtain the legality of houses of worship. The Qanun is a product of human creation; of course, everything can be revised if there is good faith to help other religious adherents.

Hypocrisy is also seen in various aspects of the qanun material for houses of worship. When the author conducted observations and interviews, the government claimed that they had served and were ready to help assist the process of obtaining a house of worship permit if the administrative requirements had been met. Especially for applicants who have completed the administration, there is a delay that exceeds the time limit (3 months) with no fixed reason. The local government escalated this case to the Province; they let go of their hands as if the governor had not issued a permit for the church in Aceh Singkil to obtain an establishment permit (AR, Interview Pastor Subulussalam, 2022). To day, after the governor has changed, even after there is an acting governor, who has no further political interests in Aceh. The Christians also did not get what they wanted. It seems to indicate 'hands-off politics'. That is, Aceh's leaders did not initiate a decision of this magnitude during their tenure.

In a more local context, Muslim community leaders in Aceh Singkil, even the ulemas, have always been open and tolerant in front of Christian representatives. During FKUB meetings, for example, community leaders encourage Christian congregations to obtain non-user support. When the support has been fulfilled, unscrupulous clerics conduct da'wah and exclamations in recitation, where the content is; *"Whoever recommends to Christians to establish a church, then his body will not be accepted by the earth, and will enter hell."* (AN, Interview with Pastor of Aceh Singkil, 2022). As a result, Muslims who have already given recommendations withdraw their recommendations or ask for the letters to be crossed out. It is a serious phenomenon that reflects hypocrisy or two-facedness.

Likewise, the local government allowed us (researchers) to explore the conflict between houses of worship and Christian worshipers in Aceh Singkil. We were helped to mediate, even when conducting FGDs. The local government was very enthusiastic and filled the building of the City Ministry of Religion. However, when we went to the field (the location of the Christian church), we were claimed to be the ones who guided the sheep between Muslim and Christian worshipers (JN, Interview with Aceh Singkil Academician, 2022). Worse, intel officers were sent to follow us so that the data collection process was no longer free and objective.

It was no different with the conflict mediators who were deployed. According to the Catholic priest, when their church was demolished and burned down, the conflict mediator, on behalf of the government, promised to build a new church after permits and legality were obtained. The demolition was intended to prevent a mass rampage (Muslim action) that resulted in casualties. The mediator promised to assist and mediate related to the church's construction and its license, even though the funds disbursed by the Central Government reached 2 billion rupiah. In fact, to this day, not a single church has been built. We are forced to worship in the remains of a church that has collapsed and is no longer feasible. The priest suspects that the Central Government has tried to facilitate, but the billions of funds were eaten by unscrupulous mediators (DR, Catholic Priest Interview, 2022).

The Urgency of House of Worship Legality

For Muslims in Aceh, the legality of establishing houses of worship is an obligation rooted in Islamic teachings. Mosques, as the main place of worship for Muslims, play a central role in Acehnese society's religious and social life. The legality of mosque establishment guaranteed by local laws and regulations is a guarantee for Muslims to conduct worship regularly, in a safe environment, and under religious provisions. In addition, there are no serious regulatory obstacles to the establishment of mosques other than technical issues. Only churches are often questioned about their legality and IMB in Aceh Singkil, whereas there are very many mosques that also do not have IMB.

The legality of establishing houses of worship has stricter rules for non-Muslims. It is clearly stated in Qanun Aceh, which requires a minimum number of 140 users and permission from the surrounding community (non-users) of at least 110 people. (Aceh Qanun Number 4 Year 2016). This provision only applies to non-Muslims, while Muslims do not have such consequences. Proportionally, this regulation may seem one-sided. However, given that Aceh has a large Muslim population and is based on Islamic law, stakeholders believe that this consequence is necessary to maintain stability and religious harmony in Aceh. Although there is some truth to this, it is not ideal if applied in Aceh Singkil, especially in sub-districts where the number of Muslims and non-Muslims is balanced. Moreover, in some villages, the population is almost all Christian (SH, FKUB official interview, 2022).

Therefore, non-Muslim houses of worship must have legality that has been measured and according to established standards. It aims to ensure the protection of their religious rights. As part of a diverse society, non-Muslims in Aceh have the right to own and build houses of worship under their beliefs. The legality of the establishment of houses of worship for non-Muslims is a guarantee that they can worship and practice their religion without discrimination or legal obstacles.

In addition, the legality of establishing houses of worship for both groups also has an urgency in maintaining inter-religious harmony in Aceh. In this unique context, the legality of establishing houses of worship guaranteed by law can be an important instrument to encourage interfaith dialog, strengthen tolerance, and avoid potential social conflicts that can undermine harmony and peace in Aceh. (Helmy et al., 2021). Thus, the urgency of the legality of the establishment of houses of worship for Muslims and non-Muslims in Aceh underscores the importance of protecting human rights and religious freedom and maintaining interfaith harmony in the unique context of this Province. The legality of establishing houses of worship is not only a guarantee for religious communities to worship freely and safely but also an important foundation for building an inclusive, tolerant, and peaceful society in Aceh.

The urgency of the legality of the establishment of houses of worship, as stated in "Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016 concerning Guidelines for the Maintenance of Religious Harmony and the Establishment of Places of Worship," is vital and cannot be delayed anymore. It can be seen from the attention of the Aceh government, which issued the regulation shortly after the central regulation. There are several reasons why the legality of the establishment of houses of worship is so crucial in Aceh, including the following.

First, Islam is the majority religion in Aceh. The presence of churches or other non-Muslim places of worship will have an impact on the response of people who generally cannot accept religious plurality in Aceh. (Rahman, 2022). *Second*, as built by Christians, special churches have worshipers who cannot move between one church and another. For example, a 10% cut of the congregation's income is fixed and allocated to one church only. So, they are not allowed to worship in other churches even though they are both Christians. Now, this fact is not understood by all ordinary Muslims. As the number of Christians increases, so will the number of churches and their presence in the corners of Aceh. This presence has not been accepted by the Acehnese Muslim community, especially if its existence is so fast and significant.

Third, the urgency of the legality of establishing houses of worship is to prevent the emergence of small churches (undung-undung) that are carried out illegally. As explained in the Aceh Qanun on Houses of Worship, before having a church with difficult administrative requirements, Christians are allowed to have a small church, but it must be legal and have a local government permit. The emergence of small churches

does not mean that the government is intolerant of non-Muslims. The government is preventing conflict on the ground, which has happened in the past (Ruhdiara, 2022))

Fourth, legality is important to prevent potential conflicts in the future. As is known, houses of worship are vital even for adherents of any religion. Without legality, houses of worship will appear uncontrollably. When they proliferate everywhere, Muslims, who are the base in Aceh, will be angered. If the construction of churches continues without control, then there is the potential for mass rampage and even fear of claiming lives. So, the existence of Qanun Aceh related to standards that regulate the establishment of houses of worship is part of socialization in the community. If all the conditions and permits are met, the church can be opened, and Muslims are obliged to obey and maintain that agreement.

Qanun Aceh's Restraint Solution

In Aceh, there are significant differences between Indonesian national law and Qanun, the sharia law applicable in the Province of Aceh. These differences cover various aspects of life, including criminal law, marriage law, and inheritance law. The Helsinki MoU, as a peace agreement between the Aceh separatist movement (GAM) and Indonesia, is a regulation that should be respected and maintained even by the Indonesian government. That means if the central government forces local regulations to interfere, the Indonesian government must be prepared for the consequences in the form of conflict again, namely Aceh's request to break away from Indonesia. That is why when Aceh Singkil Christians wrote to President Jokowi, they did not receive a one-sided response.

Therefore, the best step to be taken is raising awareness about the importance of religious tolerance in Aceh Singkil for all parties. This effort must be carried out seriously at all levels, including the executive, legislative, scholars in dayah, and civil society. The socialization program must also be included with government policies that encourage religious moderation including tolerance values.

Suppose society has reached a level of moderation, fairness, and a good understanding of the rights of adherents of other religions. In that case, that is when tensions in religious conflict can be overcome. However, if this is not achieved, all that happens is a show of power and image. Each side will try to convince the other that they are acting justly, when in fact, there is a hidden agenda behind it, where the main goal is to prevent the development of other religions.

For the Muslim side, the key role lies with the Regent of Aceh Singkil and the Governor of Aceh. If these two important figures understand the urgency of religious tolerance, the legalizing church construction in Aceh could make significant progress. However, the challenge is that politicians often adapt their policies to the majority opinion. Therefore, if most of the population is not moderate or tolerant, the leadership will find it difficult to implement programs supporting minority rights. At a minimum, if the leadership in Aceh is moderate, the next step is to conduct socialization to transform the society into a more tolerant one. The government can conduct a socialization program on Religious Moderation in the Dayah environment, even though Dayah tends to be against non-Muslims in Aceh. Nevertheless, Dayah scholars remain an authority respected by the people of Aceh, even more than the local government. (Munhanif, 2016).

Understanding the importance of reaching a mutual agreement is urgent for the Christian side. To date, Christians have openly shown resistance in various ways. They have even disseminated information about the injustices they have experienced from Muslims in Aceh Singkil regarding their right to worship. Although this step was taken as a shortcut to achieve legality for their houses of worship, it has only exacerbated the conflict and hindered the search for a solution between the two parties (DT, DPRK interview, Christian side, 2022). Such an approach is not ideal for the Christians themselves, given Aceh's special autonomy, which should not interfere with the formation of its regulations as long as they are not related to military matters.

In other words, as long as Muslims still dominate the Aceh House of Representatives (DPR), the possibility for non-Muslims in Aceh Singkil to change the qanun that hinders the legality of the establishment of

houses of worship is very small. (Din & Abubakar, 2021). Similarly, the efforts of Aceh Singkil Christians to get a response from the President and even the international Christian community will face obstacles with the Helsinki MoU that are not easy to challenge unless Indonesia is willing to relinquish Aceh as an independent region. For Indonesia, the consequences of violating the Helsinki MoU are more severe than the impact of the church construction itself. Therefore, the hardline approach taken by Christians is not ideal. The solution is to instill and socialize the importance of religious moderation, in which tolerance is one of the important components for Muslims, both the common people and the elite in Aceh.

Conclusions

The problem related to the conflict of the establishment of houses of worship in Aceh Singkil is not a matter of religious conflict but a political conflict packaged in Qanun Aceh. There is a politics of affirmation in Aceh Singkil where the government is worried about the phenomenon of reverse discrimination so that the existence of existing discrimination is maintained. By discriminating against non-Muslims as a minority, the government hopes to gain support from Muslims as the majority. The government certainly highly guarded this support, especially in maintaining their political stability. Furthermore, this affirmative politics requires media support, and the media used is Aceh Qanun No. 4/2016 on Houses of Worship. The points of this qanun are carefully arranged in terms of essence and implementation so that the permit for establishing houses of worship is difficult to realize in Aceh Singkil. The reason behind the non-issuance of permits to establish non-Muslim houses of worship is a 'hands-off policy' presented under the guise of hypocrisy. Through the ratification of the Qanun, the executive does not want to take responsibility for the legality of the establishment of houses of worship during their tenure. Since the Aceh Qanun does contain a narrative of 'postponement is allowed', the outcome of the church establishment application is always postponed or suspended in the final process.

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