

## **Being a Minority in a Moslem Neighborhood: Reflective Experience of a Buddhist Priest in Cemani Village**

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### **Abstract**

*On Tuesday, 1st of October 2019 around 02.30 a.m., Amoghasiddhi Cetiya at Cemani Village, Grogol Subdistrict, Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, was caught on fire for the second times. The carpet was scorched and the air-condition was fell-down. The crime was reported to the police, but the priest and his followers expect nothing but take it as a blessing in disguise that it's the time for them to repaint and refurnish their prayer house. By applying interview, news research, limited participant observation and reflective-interpretive approach this paper tries to discuss and conclude that in order to be able to survive a religious minority group needs to equipt themselves with personal capacity such as high sense of tolerance, modesty, relenting attitude, and ignoring their rights to justice. Those are the challenges for religious minority groups to live in Indonesia, a country which is ethnically multicultural but ironically only six religions are sanctioned by the state with Islam as the one adhered by around 80% of the population. So then, discussing inter-faith relation will result in a bias conclusion as both majority and minority have their own syndromes. Feeling of fear or being threatened by the existence of something new is the syndrome for the majority, while relenting attitude as well as tendency not to demand their rights to with the fear that struggling for justice may lead to misfortune justice for the minority, as experienced by Meiliana of Tanjungbalai, North Sumatera. The Buddhist woman of Chinese ethnic was accused of committing blasphemy in July 2016 merely because she complaint the high volume of adzan prayer call from a neighbourhood mosque. Not only her house was then destroyed by a mob, but also more than tens of vihara in her town were set on fire. In April 2019 her appeal to Supreme Court was refused, so she has to serve 18 months jail sentence as verdicted.*

**Keywords:** *Reflective experience, Meiliana case, minority syndrome*

## **Introduction**

Tuesday, October 1st 2019 around 02.30 a.m., Bambang Sudarsono<sup>1</sup> – a Buddhist priest – startledly woke up from his sleep by repeated harsh knocks on the door of his small house. When he opened he door a male neighbor who manages internet cafe for online game next door hurriedly explained that the Buddhist prayer house (cetiya or small size vihara) which is connected with his house was on fire. In a hurry the priest came into the cetiya directly from inside his house. Arriving at the cetiya he inhaled a kind of kerosene smell and found the floor carpet scorched, nearly half of the room blackened of the fire, the air-condition fell down on the floor, and the wooden cupboard also burned. Luckily, the flame has already been extinguished by the neighbor from outside using creek water at the left side of the prayer house.

This is the second times the prayer house burned by unknown. The first arson was in 2010, but it was merely afflicted the outside part of the wooden door and made the inside wall scorched. And this time, there is a part of the wooden door which looks like has been forcefully prised up, most probably it was intentionally prised up in order to insert something inflammable into the room. This small prayer house is located directly at the side of the street while at the left side there is a pathway along the creek. There is no any fence encircled the cetiya. He has no any idea whether the perpetrators of both arsons are the same person or different ones.

There was no candle lighted on the night before the room was set on fire. Usually candles be lighted on Thursday night when the members of Buddhist community gather for regular veneration, but the light will soon be finished as the candles are less then 2 centimeters thick. The flame will stop not until the preach be finalized. The Amoghasiddhi Cetiya is merely a small prayer house, around 3x4 square meters and avaragely only 15-20 people come for weekly devotion. That is why it is called cetiya or a small prayer house, not vihara. The allegation that the fire is caused by lighted candle which fell and burned down the carpet is illogical.

The next day, the chief of local police of Kapolsek Grogol AKP Didik Noer TJ in his office said that he has no authority to give statement regarding the cause of the fire considering that the case is being handled by the forensics lab at higher level police office. But *Joglosemarnews.com* on 2/10/2019 uploads news regarding the arson and quotes the chief of local police as saying: “Based on the observation, it is presumably that the arson is resulted from kerosene which was striken by fire. No casualty during the accident, while the materials caught on fire are carpet, a cardboard, wooden door and a fan.” Nevertheless, Buddhist people members of the cetiya raised discussion regarding how they would be better to respond the accident. A view members suggested that they would be better raise the issue in order to gain attention and fair handling by the apparatus. While majority of the members, including the priest himself, would rather to opt to be agree with any steps taken by the police, even if the arson would be declared as an accident instead of as a crime. Meaning that the case would probably be closed and not be followed by any further investigation.

## **Methods**

I give title to this paper “Being a Minority in a Moslem Neighborhood: Reflective Experience of a Buddhist Priest in Cemani Village” with the objective to discuss regarding how a Buddhist priest living at a Muslim majority populated village to respond a terror and crime action which is targeted to his prayer house. As his status as a priest who has devotees, so then his outlook regarding the arson can

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<sup>1</sup> In Javanese “Romo” is a honorific term attached to a Buddhist or Catholic priest. So Buddhist people call him “Romo Bambang Sudarsono”, but some of his friends call him “Romo Bambang Cemani” as he stays at Cemani Village. Born in July 3, 1954, he had been learning Tantrayana Kasogatan Buddhism under the supervision of Bhante Dewa Sutha and Bhante Aryasasano and granted abhiseka’s name Samantha Sutha.

be considered as a summary of discussion with his devotees as well as the results of his reflection by considering various aspects of life such as sociopolitics as well as security. Presented using IMRaD (Introduction, Method, Results and Discussion) format, I collected primary data by interviewing relevant sources and secondary data by downloading news and references. I use comparative approach by addressing the case afflicting Meiliana, a Buddhist woman of Chinese ethnic at Tanjungbalai in North Sumatera who had been experiencing persecution, her house was attacked by a mob of people, and this incident spread to the firing of more than ten viharas, and finally after trial processes she addressed appeal but unfortunately in April 2019 her appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court so then she has to experience 1.5 year jail sentence as verdicted for allegation that she had committed blasphemy merely because in July 2016 she complained that the volume of *adzan* prayer call from neighborhood mosque was too loud.

Eventhough I position the priest as the subject of this paper, of course it does not mean that I need to quote all his explanations – directly or indirectly – because in anthropological perspective the most important thing in field research is to be able to grab the thoughts of the subject community. So, in this title, what I mean by reflective experience of a Buddhist priest is actually my own reflective experience in understanding the problem faced by the priest. In other words, I try to imagine myself being the priest in order to understand his thoughts in dealing with the arson.

In reporting anthropological research, it is not the statements made by the research subject that matter, but instead what the most matter is how would the interpretations be made by the researcher. And in order to be able to draw fair-unbiased-and-proportional interpretations, participant observation within the community research subject is considered as the first and the most method for anthropological field research. For this particular paper with limited subject (which is more individual rather than community) I did very limited participant observation at the priest place for three times; the first was staying with the family of the priest and chatting with the priest for around five hours much before the arson happened (at that time I was conducting preliminary research on Kasogatan for my doctoral thesis); the second was around three hours the next day after the arson while the priest and two members of the vihara were repainting the room; and the third was around two hours joining the weekly veneration ritual with other members 10 days after the arson. The personal character of the priest which is extrovert and easily to talk bluntly made my field research easier. In order to get rounded picture of the arson I did also made brief interview with the local chief of police of Kapolek Grogol and with the head of Cemani Village.

Unlike ethnographic reports at general which used to blur the names of people and places in order to protect the subject community, in this paper I do not require to disguise the name of the figures or the names of the sites as, because in this era of digitalized social media it is impossible to disguise someone's name while let his place publicly known by media. Hopefully, frankly mentioning them will not put any threat to their security.

### **Reflective Experience**

Reflection might be defined as: to mirror; to look back; to cast a light on; to meditate. People use to say that “We learn from experience”, but the correct sentence is supposed to be “We learn from reflecting on experience”. The priest, the subject of this paper, has learned from reflecting on his own experiences as a priest of a minority religion among Muslim majority as well as from reflecting on other peoples' experiences. In composing this paper, I also learn from reflecting on his experiences as a priest as well as from reflecting on other peoples' experiences. While experience, according to Cambridge Dictionary, are: 1) the process of getting knowledge or skill from doing, seeing, or feeling things; 2) something that happens to you that affects how you feel; 3) the way that something happens and how it makes you feel. Reflective experience – as I use the term in this paper – consists of reflective thinking over an experience. Reflective thinking focuses on the process of making judgments about what has happened. According to Dewey (1933 in Halpern 1996), reflective thinking

is most important in prompting learning during complex problem-solving situation because it provides with opportunity to step back and think about how people actually solve problems and how particular set of problem solving strategies is appropriate for achieving their goal.

The difficulty with the experience, however, is that we can only experience our own life, what is received by our own consciousness. We can never know completely another's experiences, even though we have many clues and make inferences all the time. Others may be willing to share their experiences, but everyone censors or represses, or may not be fully aware of or able to articulate certain aspects of what has been experienced. How, then, do we overcome the limitations of individual experience? Bruner (*Experience and Its Expression* 1986: 5) quotes Dilthey's (1976: 230) answers that we transcend the narrow sphere of experience by interpreting expressions. According to Bruner, by "interpreting" Dilthey meant understanding, interpretation, and the methodology hermeneutics; by "expression" Dilthey meant representations, performances, objectifications, or texts. – But, the relationship between experience and its expressions is always problematic and is one of the important research areas in the anthropology of experience. According Bruner (1986: 6) the relationship is clearly dialogic and dialectical, for experience structures expressions, in that we understand other people and their expressions on the basis of our own experience and self-understanding. In this way I try to learn from reflecting on priest's experiences as a priest of minority religion among Muslim majority as well as from reflecting on Meiliana's experience.

### **Minority Syndrome**

There are three definitions of syndrome according to Cambridge Dictionary, and the one which suits to this topic is: a type of negative behavior or mental state that is typical of a person in a particular situation. Minority syndrome then is a type of negative behavior or mental state that is typical of people belong to minority group in a particular situation. What counts for particular situation is, especially for this paper, a situation when the members of minority groups are confronted with threatening situation or imagination in dealing with the majority around them. The consciousness of being minority apparently would lead them to cope with the threatening situation or imagination by relenting or succumbing themselves even if in the situation where they actually are the victims. Regarding the arson beseting the Buddhist prayer house in Cemani Village, the priest and the members of the Buddhist community showed such relenting manners and outlooks. They did report the incident to the local police but do not demand follow up actions for justice eventhough they feel very sure that they are victims, at least of terror. A couple members of Buddhist community I met at the prayer house the next day after the firing said that their community would rather think of the blessing in disguise behind the arson: that it is the time for them to repaint and refurbish the cetiya, and that they would not mind at all even if the apparatus close the case or see it as accident rather than crime. This is what I perceive of a manner or outlook that expresses minority syndrome, even though there are possibly different understandings such as written by Ken Joseph Jr at [www.assyrianchristians.com](http://www.assyrianchristians.com) that minority syndrom is when a minority instead of identifying with their historical and moral friends, they identity with their enemies due to intense pressure and influence of living in minority status. According to Ken, in much the way hostages often end up identifying with their captors or abuse victims defending their abusers, those with minority syndrom due to a number of factors identify with those who are in fact hurting them.

While in India, where relations between Hindu and Muslim elites had soured by the 1940s, a writer will inevitably quote Ambedkar in writing about minority syndrome. Rajeev Bhargava (2018) for example quotes Ambedkar (1945) that majority-minority syndrome is a diseased network of relations so poisoned, and accompanied by an assortment of negative emotions (envy, malice, and hatred) so extreme, that it propels groups to vengeful savagery. This send them on a downward spiral of deeper and deeper estrangement. In such syndromes, mutual animosity circulates freely, adding layer upon layer of grievance. Chronic mutual paranoia develops over time and inter-group relations

are perverted. According to Bhargava, Ambedkar appears to have entered the mindset of extremists on both sides, those who act with the sole purpose of humiliating and hurting each other. Hostility to the other is their defining feature. – Bhargava (2002) writes in *Open Democracy* that the term syndrome points, at the very least, to the breakdown of basic trust and common understanding between the majority and the minority. But in fact it encompasses something even more dreadful: a diseases network of neurotic relations, so completely poisoned and accompanied by such a vertiginous assortment of negative emotions (envy, malice, jealousy, spite and hatred) that communities are bound to slide deeper down the path of still deeper hostility and frenzied mutual destruction. – Even though in Indonesia the situation is not as bad as in India where the minority Muslim is regarded strong, it is relevant to share the minority-majority syndrome here in order to get sharpened understanding of the impacts of minority-majority syndrome.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **The Meiliana Case**

Minority and majority are something incomparable. To compare the two will only lead to unfairness. By quantity they are much different and it will lead to other differences. In order to provide general situation regarding the position of minority religious groups living within Muslim majority of Indonesia, in this paper I present the news regarding Meiliana case. The blasphemy conviction of Meiliana, a 44-year-old ethnic Chinese Buddhist resident of Tanjungbalai, North Sumatera, for complaining about volume of the *adzan* (call to prayer) has garnered worldwide attention and condemnation. But how exactly did the case unfold from simple noise complaint to an 18-month prison sentence? Below is the report by Karina M. Tehusijarana and Apriadi Gunawan for *The Jakarta Post*, August 23, 2016 edition.

### **The complaint**

Meiliana's complaint was made on the morning of July 22, 2016 to her neighbor Kastini, who owned a stall near her house. Reports vary on what she actually said – her lawyers claim she merely remarked that the *adzan* broadcast from the nearby mosque was louder than it used to be, while the legal indictment says she asked Kasini, a Muslim, to tell the mosque caretakers to lower the volume as it hurt her ears. -- All parties agree, however, that Meiliana's initial complaint was only a single person. Over the next few days, however, her statement became distorted and rumors spread that a Chinese woman wanted to "ban the *adzan*".

On the evening of July 29, 2016, a small group of people, including a mosque staff member, went to Meiliana's house to confirm the truth of her complaint. According to the indictment, Meiliana said "Yes, lower the volume of the mosque. It's too loud and hurts my ears when I hear it." The group took offense at her statement, which they considered rude, and returned to the mosque. Meiliana's husband Lian Tui went to the mosque to apologize but by then a mob had started to form.

### **The riot**

After the group's confrontation with Meiliana, provocative messages spread like wildfire on social media and messaging applications, with some even claiming the woman had thrown rocks at the mosque and forcefully stopped prayers. Later that night, an angry mob started to gather in front of the local subdistrict office and went to Meiliana's house to throw rocks at it. The violence then spread to nearby Buddhist temples. Fourteen Buddhist temples in Tanjungbalai were burned and ransacked by mobs between the night of July 29 and the morning of July 30, 2016. No fatalities were reported in the incident but damage ran into the billions of rupiah.

### **Inequity and Buddha Statue**

Opinions differ on what caused a seemingly innocuous complaint to spiral into a violent riot. Ethnic Chinese business people said the social and economic gap between those of Chinese-descent and the non-Chinese people in Tanjungbalai was among the main reasons for the riot. Leo Lopulisa, a local fisheries businessman, said a Chinese Indonesian in Tanjungbalai accounted for about 10% of

the city's population of over 10,900. Of that figure, some 3% are categorized as very rich, while the rest are also in a comfortable financial condition.

Muslim community leaders, on the other hand, blamed the riot on underlying tensions resulting from the construction of a six-meter-tall Buddha Amitabha statue on top of a Buddhist temple in the city. "The presence of the Buddha statue in Tanjungbalai is like a ticking time bomb, it can trigger a riot at any time. That's why it has to be taken down soon," Tanjungbalai Interfaith Communication Forum (FKUB) chairman Haidir Siregar said a month after the incident. Haidir said the majority Muslims in Tanjungbalai could not accept the Buddha statue in their region because they considered the city of Islamic. The statue was taken down in October 2016.

### **The legal consequences**

The police arrested 19 people for their role in the riot. Eight were charged with looting, nine with malicious destruction of property and two with inciting violence. All were given one to four month jail sentences. The police themselves built a case against Meiliana based on a report filed by their own officer, Brig. Kuntoro. "How can we prove Meiliana insulted a religion when nobody reported her to the police? To solve this problem, Brig. Kuntoro reported her," North Sumatera Police spokesperson Sr. Comr. Rina Sari Ginting said in 2016. Rina said Kuntoro had reason to report Meiliana because he was at the scene when the mob argued with Meiliana outside her house. Kuntoro came to the location at the request of the neighborhood head.

Kuntoro's report claimed that Meiliana's complaint constituted an insult to Islam, based on the argument he witnessed between Meiliana and the mob outside her house on July 29. Police initially struggled to process the case against Meiliana, with expert witnesses saying that Meiliana's statement contained no expression of hate.

### **The fatwa**

Soon after the riot on Aug. 9, 2016, Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) chairman Ma'ruf Amin – now the vice president of Indonesia – deplored the fact that local people chose to burn temples to express their anger against Meiliana. He added that it was acceptable to lower the volume of loudspeakers if people in the neighborhood were bothered. "Although [Meiliana] expressed her complaint angrily, such an act should not be replied to with anger. Both parties should sit together to discuss her concerns," Ma'ruf said.

However, in January 2017, the North Sumatera chapter of the Indonesian Ulema Council issued a fatwa declaring that Meiliana's complaint was "demeaning and insulting towards Islam" because the *adzan* was part of Islamic law. Based on the fatwa, police charged Meiliana with blasphemy that same month, but she reportedly disappeared until she was finally arrested on May 30, 2018.

### **The conviction**

Meiliana's blasphemy trial started on June 26, 2018 and later on Aug. 13 the prosecutors demanded that she be found guilty as stipulated in article 156 and 156a of the Criminal Code, and be sentenced to 1.5 years in prison. Meiliana's lawyer, Ranto Sibarani, denied the prosecutions' claims, saying that the blasphemy charges against his client were based on hearsay and that no one had directly heard her say all the words she was accused of saying. The mother of four was nevertheless found guilty by the Medan District Court on Tuesday and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment. Her legal team has said that they would appeal the verdict.

### **The reaction**

Meiliana's conviction has drawn widespread criticism from domestic and international rights groups and two of Indonesia's largest Islamic mass organizations. Amnesty International called the verdict a "ludicrous decision: that constituted a "flagrant violation of freedom of expression." The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR) said her case showed once again that the Criminal Code's blasphemy articles were used "to attack minority groups." Executives from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah also denounced that verdict, with NU legal division head Robikin Emhas saying

that Meiliana's statement did not constitute blasphemy. Muhammadiyah secretary Abdul Mu'ti agreed and said there should be an in-depth study to review the blasphemy-related articles and laws, arguing that the provisions were vague and open to subjective interpretation. Anti Discrimination Movement (Gandi) said that Meiliana's statement was similar to what Vice President Jusuf Kalla said in 2015. Kalla, also the chairman of the Indonesian Mosque Council (MI), criticized to overuse of mosque loudspeakers during Ramadhan that year. Therefore, the North Sumatera's MUI should review their fatwa, said Gandi's secretary general, Amad Ari Masyhuri, who is also the chairman of NU's Quran reciters association.

### **The supreme court**

The news of *The Jakarta Post* on April 8, 2019 said that the panel of justices rejected the appeal by Meiliana and upheld her 1.5-year prison sentence. Meiliana's lawyer, Ranto Sibarani, said he was surprise by the court's decision. Ranto said he expected the Supreme Court to accept the appeal because he claimed there was not sufficient evidence that Meiliana committed blasphemy. "The evidence was only a statement signed by residents. It's strange that the statement signed by other people could be used as evidence of religious blasphemy," he insisted.

Meanwhile, Vincent Bevins wrote in *The Washington Post* on August 23, 2018 that the conviction on blasphemy charges has alarmed many in Indonesia who were already worried about the erosion of religious pluralism in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. In the newspaper he also includes the Ahok case which was similar to Meiliana case:

Meiliana, a 44-year-old Buddhist from the island of Sumatera, was convicted Tuesday of violating Indonesia's controversial blasphemy law and sentenced to 18 months in prison. Her crimes: coplaining about the volume of the Islamic call to prayer blasted by a mosque's loudspeakers near her home.

Last year, popular former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is a Christian and is commonly known as "Ahok," was sent to prison for two years under the blasphemy law for allegedly disrespecting the Koran. Meiliana, who like many Indonesians uses only one name, may appeal the decision against her, even though convictions of this type are rarely overturned. -- The case has made Meiliana a minor case celebre among more-liberal Indonesians, and the country's two largest Muslim organizations have criticized her conviction.

"She did not commit blasphemy. What she dis was offer a neighborly complain, and that is not an insult to Islam," said Ismail Hasani, a legal expert at the Islamic State University in Jakarta and reseach director at Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, which he said would work with other civil society groups to fight Meiliana's conviction. "More generally, we believe that the blasphemy law itself does more than anything else to limit freedom of religion in Indonesia."

Indonesia, a multiethnic democracy made up of thousands of islands, officially recognizes six religions as fully equal under the law and has long been viewed as one of the most tolerant Muslim-majority nations in the world. But developments in the past few years, including Ahok's conviction, proposed legislation to ban homosexual acts and the rise of Islamist political groups, have worried supporters of the secular approach.

Meiliana's case has become part of the larger debate over religious pluralism, and tens of thousands had signed an online petition asking Widodo to "Free Meiliana, uphod tolerance!"

Like Ahok, Meiliana is part of Indonesia's ethnic-Chinese minority, which has often been subject to discrimination. Human Rights Watch has found that the blasphemy law has been used to persecute a wide variety of groups, and it is estimates that at least 22 people have been convicted under the law since Widodo assumed office in 2014. Along with groups such as Amnesty International and the Setara Institute, Human Rights Watch has been actively campaigning to revoke the blasphemy law. Meiliana case is apparently a strong mirror to reflect for minority in Indonesia. It gives a strong reflection or a strong message that minority is expected to be very humble, mute, and be better to

succumb even though in times of being victims. Opening mouth will only attract misfortune. So that in order to be able to survive a religious minority group needs to equip themselves with personal capacity such as high sense of tolerance, modesty, relenting attitude, and ignoring their rights to justice. Those are the challenges for religious minority groups to live in Indonesia. With such consideration then most of Buddhist community that used to join veneration rituals at Amoghasiddhi Cetiya tend to see the blessing in disguise behind the arson instead of seeking justice after the terror of arson: that it is the time for them to repaint and refurbish the cetiya. Not only because they are Buddhists, but also because more than half of them are of Chinese ethnic or in short: they are double minority. More over, the arson happened just after big students rallies in several big cities against the signing of the bill by President as they considered that the signing will weaken the Corruption Eradication Commission. Just after the first rally, Wamena city in uphill of Papua was on fire and around 32 migrants were killed. In such chaotic national political situation which only 20 days before presidential inauguration, especially minority groups need to be alert toward any action that may trigger or even provoke bigger chaos. So then, to keep silent regarding the arson of the cetiya is considered wiser attitude.

### **The Sub-village of Ngruki**

Cemani is a village name at Grogol Subdistrict, Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. By looking at the concrete houses owned by the population in the village which are well-shaped and properly-ordered with asphalted roads, at a glance we may conclude that the densely populated urban village is prosperous enough compared to other (urban) villages in Indonesia. There are two industrious factories at Cemani Village, namely Konimex Sobisco producing biscuits and Batik Keris producing batik fabrics. Without mentioning any figure, the Head of Cemani Village Hadi Indrianto, S.T., said that in his village there are quite view people living under the poverty line. On October 10, 2019, when I was visiting his office in order to collect data regarding the amount of religion-based population, the head of village and his staff claimed that no such data available at their office. Instead, they suggested me to find it at *Kantor Urusan Agama Kecamatan Grogol* (subdistrict level of office of religious affair which mostly deals with Muslim marriage). For me this is a new fact that a village office has no such data. But anyway this constitutes a kind of advancement or good progress. Eventhough I failed in collecting data I expect, frankly speaking I feel happy with this new fact, as it gives me a good perception that the village office seems to apply rights-based approach towards its population disregard of their religious background. Yet the Chief of Cemani Village was able to explain that at this time there are 33 mosques, 3 churches and 1 Buddhist vihara at his village area.

The area of Cemani Village consists of 8 sub-villages, namely: Cemani, Ngruki, Candi, Turi, Gambiran, Jati, dan Waringinrejo. Ngruki? Yes! Ngruki is a nation-wide popular name as in this sub-village there is Al-Mu'min Islamic Boarding School or (*Pondok Pesantren Al Mu'min* or Pondok Ngruki has been perceived as having connection with terrorism. For example when in 2002 Bali was blasted by terrorists attack. The bombings killed over 200 people. The perpetrators of the bombing -- Imam Samudra (38), Amrozi Nurhasyim (47) and Ali Ghufron (48) -- who were then executed in 2008, all have ties to one Pondok Ngruki. The school, according to Merina Dorian at *WPR World Politics Review* (Nov. 10, 2008 edition) is one of the most notorious in the country for espousing a fundamentalist version of Islam and for producing particularly fervent alumni. "We practice Islam as we believe it to be, as fundamentalists," said Ustadz Wahyuddin, the director of Pondok Ngruki, in 2008 to *World Politics Review* (WPR). "And it's a normal condition that some people don't like what we are doing here." Still according to WPR, Wahyuddin said that an Islamic State that practice Sharia Law is a worthwhile endeavor. Wahyuddin denied responsibility for the actions of former studets, saying that any of them, including Ghufron, had trained in Afghanistan during the late 1980s and were influenced by Osama Bin Laden and other non-Indonesians. He offered the school's location -- in a neighborhood that includes Muslims and non-Muslims alike -- as proof of its intentions. "We don't

disturb any of the churches here, we live in peace with them,” he said, as quoted by WPR. But the fact is there have been more than ten of terrorists identified as the alumni of Pondok Ngruki.

According to Briefing of the International Crisis Group dated 8 August 2002 titled “Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Ngruki Network in Indonesia”, one network of militant Muslims has produced all the Indonesian nationals so far suspected of links to al-Qaeda. This briefing paper explains how that network emerged, its historical antecedents, and the political dynamics over the last two decades that led some of its members from Indonesia to Malaysia to Afghanistan. The network has as its hub a religious boarding school (*pesantren* or *pondok*) near Solo, Central Java, known as Pondok Ngruki, after the village where the school is located. The “Ngruki network” began to coalesce in the late 1970s Indonesian intelligence operatives embarked on an operation to expose potential political enemies of then President Soeharto from the Muslim right. It drew in additional members in the early 1980s, many of whom had served time in prison for anti-government activities. An inner core of the network, led by the two founders of Pondok Ngruki – Abdullah Sungkar (now dead) and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir – and radicalised by repression at home, fled to Malaysia in 1985. Some associated with the Ngruki network returned to Indonesia after Soeharto’s resignation in 1998; others stayed in Malaysia but continued to be in close contact with those who went back. – Most members of the network share common characteristics: loyalty to Pondok Ngruki or its founders; commitment to carrying on the struggle of Darul Islam rebellions of the 1950s; desire to create an Islamic state by first establishing an Islamic community or *jemaah islamiyah*, and shared experiences of political detention in the 1980s. Many are on the executive committee of an organisation formed in Yogyakarta in 2000 called the *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (MMI, Indonesian Mujahidin Council).

Still according to the briefing paper, the problem is that the Ngruki network is far wider than the handful of people who have been accused of ties of Al-Qaeda and includes individuals with well-established political legitimacy for having defied the Soeharto government and gone to prison as a result. Many Indonesians have expressed concern that pressure from the U.S. and Southeast Asian governments on Indonesian authorities to carry out preventive arrests of suspects without hard evidence could be seriously counterproductive. It could easily turn the targets of that pressure into heroes within the Muslim community – as has happened with Abu Bakar Ba’asyir – to the point that they become the beneficiaries of substantial political and financial support.

When I heard about the arson afflicted Buddhist prayer house in Cemani Village, which the location is just close to Pondok Ngruki, my imagination was easily dragged there. But Romo Bambang Sudarsono, the priest, negated my question. He said, “No. The arson was not committed by *santri*<sup>2</sup> Ngruki. I am very sure. Because some of the *santri* used to visit me here.” Or, is there any possibility that the arson was committed to terror the priest personally and nothing to do with religion, as addressed by the head of village? The speculative allegation expressed by the head of village – who has been a year servicing at Cemani Village -- is not without any basis. “Well, I know him personally. His attitude is somewhat arrogant. So there are might people who don’t like him. Or may be he has a kind of enemy,” said the head of village.

### Land Ownership

But the head of village said that the Buddhist prayer house is occupying a piece of land owned by the state which was planned for a road. It is not constructed on the land with private ownership. As the land is state owned, actually it can be proposed for public use such as for a prayer house. But the problem with Amoghasiddhi Vihara is, the priest and his family members also stay there using rooms just at the back of the prayer room. The priest acknowledged that he has been occupying the land,

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<sup>2</sup> *Santri* is a term for students of Islamic boarding school.

without any legal ownership. He does not possess any land ownership certificate, but he always pays annual tax.

The story of the land occupation begins at 1990 when Romo Bambang Sudarsono started to stay and construct a small house above the land. Aside from being a Buddhist priest, he has been serving his life as a *Hansip*<sup>3</sup> since 1980 (now he is the coordinator for 15 *Linmas*<sup>4</sup>). In 1991 he got permit from the Office of Religious Affairs to use the land for a Buddhist prayer house. But after 17 years, in 2008 he was asked to leave the land by the head of village (of that era) supported by 176 signatures of all hamlet people with the reason that the land would be used as a road towards a mosque. But Romo Bambang Sudarsono thinks that the mosque has already got its road towards opposite street. He did resist against the eviction efforts by the head of village and gained advocative support from NU<sup>5</sup> youth people. At that time the vice regent of Sukoharjo was Pak Toha, an NU figure. Romo Bambang Sudarsono then, accompanied by Rudi -- a vocal youth activist -- was able to meet with the vice regent who then helped him in communicating the case with relevant officers such as regency level members of parliament and Kesbanglinmas<sup>6</sup>. This efforts won against the eviction idea of the head of village.

But in 2010, 2 years after the idea of eviction, there was an effort of arson afflicted the prayer house. And again, on October 1st, 2019, the arson happened again, afflicted the small Buddhist prayer house. No one knows whether the perpetrators are the same person or not.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hansip* is short for *Pertahanan Sipil*, literally translated as Civil Defense, was a type of local security officer on an administrative village. Based on Presidential Decree No. 55/1972, *Hansip* is part of defense and security component in Total Defense and Security System.

<sup>4</sup> *Linmas* stands for *Perlindungan Masyarakat*, literally means civilian neighborhood guards. *Linmas* (formerly known as *Hansip*) is structurally organized under local governments (municipality/regency, subdistrict and village). A village government, Indonesia's lowest level of government administration, has at least 10 *Linmas* officers.

<sup>5</sup> NU is short for Nahdlatul Ulama (literally translated to Revival of the Ulama) is a traditional Sunni Islam movement in Indonesia following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. NU was established on Januari 31, 1926 in Surabaya as a response to the rise of Wahabism in Saudi Arabia and Islamic modernism in Indonesia. NU is the largest independent Islamic organization in the world.

<sup>6</sup> *Kesbanglinmas* is short for *Kesatuan Bangsa dan Perlindungan*, literally translated to National Unity and Community Protection.

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### **Interviewees**

1. Rm. Bambang Sudarsono, the Buddhist priest, on 7/5/2018, 2/10/2019 & 10/10/2019 at Cetiya Amoghasiddhi.
2. AKP Didik Noer TJ, the police chief of Grogol District, on 2/10/2019 at his office.
3. Hadi Indrianto, S.T., head of Cemani Village, on 10/10/2019 at his office.