

Cleric arrested for blasphemy after allowing women to preach in world's largest Muslim-majority country

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Leader of the Al Zaytun Islamic Boarding School, Panji Gumilang, walks before examination at the Indonesian Police Criminal Investigation Agency in Jakarta, Indonesia, August 1, 2023.

A Muslim cleric has been arrested on charges of blasphemy and hate speech in Indonesia after his decision to allow women to preach and pray beside men sparked a backlash among religious conservatives in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation.

Panji Gumilang, 77, who runs the Al-Zaytun boarding school in the district of Indramayu in West Java, was arrested on Tuesday, Indonesian National Police official Djuhandhani Rahardjo told reporters outside its Criminal Investigation Agency in Jakarta.

In the past, the school, home to roughly 5,000 students, has faced public backlash over its unorthodox practices like allowing men and women to pray alongside each other and women

to become imams. Unlike other Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, its prayer sessions do not follow gender segregation, angering conservative groups.

Most mainstream schools of Islam around the world segregate men and women during prayers and do not permit women to lead mixed gendered prayers or deliver sermons.

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, with 231 million Muslims. Although it has an overwhelming Muslim majority, it is constitutionally secular and officially recognizes six religions

Strict Islamic laws are already enforced in parts of the country, including the semi-autonomous Aceh province, where alcohol and gambling are banned and public floggings take place for a range of offenses including homosexuality and adultery.

Police did not specify what Panji had said or done that constituted blasphemy but said they were acting on public complaints.

Panji was "supportive" of Muslim women becoming imams and leading others in prayer, something which "isn't normal in Indonesian society," said Andreas Harsono, Indonesia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "He has been promoting gender equality within Islam and this has angered the conservatives. There is nothing wrong with him (a Muslim cleric) promoting women's rights – something is terribly wrong with blasphemy laws," he added.

"Blasphemy cases have been increasing drastically over the years ... Officials in Indonesia are using these laws more frequently against religious minorities in the name of 'religious harmony' and it's (grown) more and more toxic. It is becoming an increasingly Islamized state and there will be many more consequences... for people whose views are considered to be against the Islamic establishment," he said, referencing

controversial amendments to its criminal code set to be passed by 2025.