

Chinese Indonesians recognize improvement

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Chinese-Indonesians are beginning to enjoy the lowering of many major hurdles in living in the mainly Muslim country, a top Confucian leader says.

The only remaining problem is the issue of ID cards, over which ethnic Chinese residents still face discrimination in many parts of the country, said Indonesia Confucianism High Assembly (Matakin) chairman Budi S. Tanuwibowo.

He was speaking during a celebration in Jakarta on Sunday for Chinese New Year, which was attended by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Some 6,000 Confucians were present at the event organized by Matakin.

In turn, Yudhoyono called on all state officials to improve their services to the country's Confucian and Chinese-Indonesian communities, saying all discriminatory acts against minorities must be put to an end.

He added there had been significant progress in the fulfillment of civilian rights for both minority groups over the last 10 years.

"I'm asking the religious affairs minister, the education minister and the justice and human rights minister, as well as all related parties in both central and local administrations, to continue to improve the quality of their services so as to fulfil the civilian rights of the Confucian and ethnic Chinese communities," Yudhoyono said in his address.

"In accordance with the 2006 Law on Citizenship, you [state officials] should not have any doubts about giving good service.

"There should be no more discriminatory treatment against anyone."

The improvement of minority groups' rights, the President added, could be found in marriage registrations, now available to Confucian couples.

It can also be seen in the education sector, with the Religious Affairs Ministry's issuance of two regulations legalizing the incorporation of Confucian teachings in school curricula.

"Also, the Center for Religious Harmony now serves Confucianism. And there are no more problems now about the establishment of houses of worship for Confucians," Yudhoyono said.

In response, Matakin's Budi Tanuwibowo acknowledged the improving conditions, citing "three big occurrences" last year, including the issuance of the two ministerial regulations and the granting of a plot of land at the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah theme park to establish a Confucian temple, whose ground-breaking ceremony will take place Monday.

Another "historic" occurrence was Yudhoyono's attendance, the first ever by a president, at the celebration last October of Prophet Kong Zi's 2559th birthday in Cibinong, West Java, Budi added.

"All problems [over the rights of Confucians and ethnic Chinese communities] are over now, except in the application of ID cards, which remains problematic in many regions," he said.

Indonesia officially began celebrating Chinese New Year after former president Abdurrahman Wahid in 1999 annulled a 1967 presidential instruction banning all activities related to Chinese traditions, including the practices of Confucianism teaching.

Three years later, Wahid's successor Megawati Soekarnoputri officially declared Chinese New Year a national holiday.

Yudhoyono, who is seeking another five-year term in office, seized upon Sunday's event to ask Confucians to vote during the upcoming legislative and presidential elections.