

Indonesia bans mandatory religious attire in schools, rights groups hail decision

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The government's signing of the decree on Wednesday on religious attire in school dress codes came a few weeks after news emerged about a school in West Sumatra province forcing non-Muslim female students to wear a hijab.

Students attend a learning session at a school in Padang, West Sumatra province, Indonesia. (Antara Foto/Iggoy el Fitra/ via Reuters)

Jakarta: Activists in Indonesia on Thursday lauded the government's decision to ban public schools from making religious attire mandatory, a move that followed national outrage over non-Muslim students being forced to wear a hijab.

Indonesia officially recognises six religions, with nearly 90% of the population are Muslim, but concern has grown in recent years that more conservative interpretations of Islam are fueling religious intolerance.

The government's signing of the decree on Wednesday on religious attire in school dress codes came a few weeks after news emerged about a school in West Sumatra province forcing non-Muslim female students to wear a hijab.

The issue captured national attention because of a protest by the parents of one of the girls, news of which spread on social media.

Yaquut Cholil Qoumas, Indonesia's religious minister, said the West Sumatra case was just the "tip of the iceberg".

"There are no reasons to infringe upon others' freedom in the name of religious expression," he told a news conference on Wednesday.

The special autonomous province of Aceh, which enforces sharia law, is exempt from the decree, Education Minister Nadiem Makarim said.

Beka Ulung Hapsara, a commissioner at Indonesia's main rights body, Komnas HAM, said the decree respects people's choice to express their beliefs.

"Places of education are a space to develop independent souls free of discrimination, where respect is fostered," he said.

Andreas Harsono, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, said schools in more than 20 provinces still make religious attire mandatory in their dress code, so the decree was a positive step.

"Many public schools require girls and female teachers to wear the hijab that too often prompt bullying, intimidation, social pressures, and in some cases, forced resignation," he said.

- Reuters