



Indonesian firefighters trying to contain a forest fire in Borneo. Photo by Amirin in 2015, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2tpU4WT>

Note on this Case Study:

Global anthropogenic—or human caused—climate change has deeply impacted the ways that religions are practiced around the world. At the same time, religions have also played major roles in framing the issue among their believers. Some Muslims work tirelessly to change their habits and mitigate human impact on the climate. Others ignore the crisis, or do not believe in Muslim environmentalism. Read this case study with this in mind: the Muslims described here show a range of reactions to climate change, but all of them are Muslim.

As always, when thinking about religion and climate change, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Environmental Fatwas of Indonesia

The archipelago nation of Indonesia in south east Asia has the largest population of Muslims in the world—over 200 million in 2015.¹ Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch beginning in the 1600s, but colonial rule was weakened during WWII, when the islands were occupied by Japan. The Dutch were overthrown by Indonesian independence forces in 1949, and local dictators ruled the country until democratic elections in 2004. After centuries of such colonial domination, some Muslims have seen climate change as a Western problem, caused by industrialization, capitalism, and the exploitation of colonies like Indonesia. According to these Muslims, since the issue was caused by Western powers, they should be the ones to fix it. However, there is growing consensus among Muslims that they must respond to climate change, partially because many majority Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, are already feeling effects of the crisis.²

There, foreign companies have been especially guilty of creating health hazards. For example, the American-run Grasberg mine, the world's largest gold mine, dumps as much as 200,000 tons of waste into Indonesian rivers daily, destroying thousands of acres of rainforest and swampland, and killing much of the aquatic wildlife that local people depend on for survival.³ In addition, many companies use “slash and burn” tactics to clear rainforests for palm oil plantations. This is illegal, but Indonesian law has done little to stop planters. Their fires often rage out of control and are difficult to put out due to the forest's

highly flammable undergrowth. As a result, for months each year, Indonesia and its neighbors are cloaked with thick smoke: the so-called “haze season.”⁴ It was estimated that in 2015 alone, over 500,000 people experienced respiratory illness from the smoke, and it may cause as many as 100,000 deaths. The fires also release tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere; in just two months in 2015, these fires released more CO₂ than all of Germany that entire year.⁵

¹ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).

² John Wihbey, “Green Muslims, Eco-Islam and Evolving Climate Change Consciousness,” *Yale Climate Connections*, (New Haven, CT), Apr. 11, 2012. <https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2012/04/green-muslims-eco-islam-and-evolving-climate-change-consciousness/>

³ Susan Schulman, “The \$100bn gold mine and the West Papuans who say they are counting the cost,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 1, 2016. <http://bit.ly/2eUkGbl>

⁴ Bernadette Christina Munthe and Glenys Kirana, “Indonesia urges action against slash-and-burn clearing as haze season arrives,” *Reuters*, Aug. 25, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-haze-idUSKCN10U0VC>

⁵ Oliver Balch, “Indonesia’s forest fires: everything you need to know,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 11, 2015 <http://bit.ly/2t1p559>; Kate Schecter and Edd Wright, “Indonesia’s Burning Problem,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 11, 2015. <http://fam.ag/1PCcXKr>

Faced with these challenges, the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI), the highest authority on Islamic law in Indonesia, has issued several *fatwas* addressing these problems. In Islamic law—known as *shari‘ah*—a *fatwa* is a non-binding legal opinion. A *fatwa* cites the Qur’an, *hadith* (or sayings of the prophet), and classical legal texts to give an informed opinion on a topic. While Islamic law has no legal authority in Indonesia outside of marriage and family law, the opinions of the MUI can carry significant moral weight with the Muslim population.⁶

In 2011, the MUI issued a *fatwa* which declared that destructive mining operations are *haram*—or strictly forbidden—according to Islamic law. They stated that classical Islamic sources clearly prohibit mining companies from damaging and polluting ecosystems, destroying biodiversity, or causing poverty in local communities. The *fatwa* recommended that the Indonesian government be far more selective with their permitting, and more strongly enforce existing law, including major penalties for big polluters.⁷

In 2014, the MUI issued a *fatwa* declaring that “killing, harming, assaulting, hunting and/or engaging in other activities which threaten endangered species with extinction are forbidden.” Like other Islamic legal opinions, the *fatwa* cites Qur’anic passages, *hadith*, and classical law. For example, the MUI stated that Islam instructs believers, “to care for creatures on earth,” by citing a *hadith* which states that Muhammad once said: “love every creature on Earth, and you shall be loved by [God] in heavens.” After providing extensive religious foundations for their ruling, they recommended that the government take stronger steps to protect endangered species, businesses restore damaged ecosystems, religious leaders spread environmental understanding, and all Muslims “actively participate” in protecting endangered species.⁸

Most recently, in 2016, the MUI issued an environmental *fatwa* religiously banning “slash and burn” farming saying: “the burning of forests and land that can cause damage, pollution, harm to other persons, adverse health effects, and other harmful effects, is religiously forbidden (*haram*).” They also banned deriving benefit from the burning of forests, even if the person in question didn’t start the fire. Again, the council explained their ruling in detail using the Qur’an, *hadith*, and classical law, such as *surah* 2 verse 60 of the Qur’an: “Eat and drink from the provision of Allah, and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption.”⁹ While it is important to remember that these rulings have no legal authority in Indonesia, and indeed, such fires are already illegal in secular law, the secular government was pleased with the ruling. Indonesia’s Environment Minister said: “based on our experience, we understand that applying the law in its material form would not suffice. But there is something more important, which is moral values.”¹⁰ The political leaders hope that the moral condemnation, in addition to legal punishments, will finally deter the arsonists. These Indonesian *fatwas* have also caused conversation in other parts of the world, with Islamic leaders in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan, all considering their own *fatwas* on similar environmental issues.¹¹

⁶ Mark E Cammack & R Michael Feener, “The Islamic Legal System in Indonesia,” *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 21, no. 1 (2012): 13-42.

⁷ “MUI Issues Fatwa against Rogue Mining Companies,” *Pusat Pengajian Islam, Universitas Nasional* (Jakarta), Sept. 12, 2011.

<http://ppi.unas.ac.id/mui-issues-fatwa-against-rogue-mining-companies/>

⁸ “Protection of Endangered Species to Maintain the Balanced Ecosystems,” *fatwa* no. 04/2014, *Ulama Council of Indonesia*, 2014.

http://ppi.unas.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Fatwa_MUI-libre.pdf

⁹ “Law on the burning of forests and land and the control thereof” *fatwa* no. 30/2016, *Ulama Council of Indonesia*, 2016.

<http://ppi.unas.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FATWA-KARHUTLA-English.pdf>

¹⁰ Francis Chan, “Indonesian Islamic council issues fatwa against forest-burning,” *Singapore Times*, Sept. 13, 2016.

<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/haram-to-burn-forest-intentionally-says-indonesian-islamic-council>

¹¹ Sarah Hiddleston, “Can “green fatwas” combat climate change,” *Nature Middle East*, Nov. 22, 2016.

<http://www.natureasia.com/en/nmiddleeast/article/10.1038/nmiddleeast.2016.208>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- 2014 fatwa: “Protection of Endangered Species to Maintain the Balanced Ecosystems” from the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI): <http://bit.ly/2uTi0Qs>
- 2016 fatwa: “Law on the Burning of Forests and Land and the Control Thereof” from the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI): <http://bit.ly/2u0MGCX>

Secondary Sources:

- The Center for International Forestry Research, based in Indonesia, explains the environmental issues caused by slash and burn (2015): <http://bit.ly/1HrpgTe>
- Greenpeace interviews Indonesians displaced by fires (2014): <http://bit.ly/1F8koQZ>
- BBC on source and dangers of Indonesian fires (2015): <http://bit.ly/2tGb2Px>
- BBC on fire risks to endangered wildlife in Indonesia (2015): <http://bit.ly/2uIwrrb>
- Al Jazeera on how Indonesian fires affect public health in other countries (2013): <http://bit.ly/2tzQgCB>
- New York Times on Indonesia and the diversity of Islamic law (2017): <http://nyti.ms/2quwGUO>

Discussion Questions

- Read one of the fatwas from the Ulama Council of Indonesia in the primary sources. How do the authors of the fatwa apply ancient Arabian sources to their modern Indonesian context? What does this say about Islam?
- How does Indonesia’s colonial context effect how Indonesian Muslims think about climate change?
- How do the MUI’s fatwas show how Islam changes over time?
- How do the MUI’s fatwas show how Islam is embedded in specific cultures?
- What kind of power does Islam have in the Indonesian legal system? Why might secular leaders welcome these fatwas, when the religious rulings agree with what is already secular law? What kind of pressure does the MUI put on the secular government when their rulings don’t agree with secular law?



A young orangutan, a critically endangered species only found on the Indonesian islands of Borneo and Sumatra, whose population is severely threatened by slash and burn fires. Photo by Michaël Catanzariti, 2007. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2ub7IUP>