Brief Impressions of our Indonesian experience:

After a week packed with visits, meetings, formal round table discussions and informal exchanges over meals, I find myself with more questions at the end of the week than at the beginning. Probably not surprisingly. To imagine it would be possible to acquire an understanding of religious freedom and inter faith activity in a country the size of Indonesia (235 million people, 1,069 ethnic groups spread across 17,000 islands) in a matter of days says much for the optimism of the organisers for our capacity to absorb information! That the group has come away after a week, which included discussion with government officials, university professors, the British Ambassador, members of NGOs, volunteer groups and villagers, having gained a flavour of some of the main issues, is testament to the excellent programme put on by the committee, comprising representatives of the Directorate of Public Diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity, who worked tirelessly and with great good humour to ensure our stay was so memorable.

Of the population, 87% are Muslim yet it was emphasised that Indonesia is neither an Islamic state nor a secular one. An impression of a country enthusiastic for the ‘unity in diversity’ which is enshrined under principle 3 of the Indonesian Constitution, *Pancasila*, was consistently conveyed by the government officials we met on the first day and the two Muslim organisations, Muhamadia and Nahdlatul Ulama, who between them boast some 50 million members involved in health, education and social welfare services, supplementing the government provision.

By day two, other voices were beginning to be heard. We met with ‘inter faith activists’ from the Indonesian Conference for Religion and Peace (ICRS), Interfidei, the main inter faith dialogue centre which has been operating for 15 years, and the only organisation we encountered which appeared inclusive of dialogue with people with all faiths - not solely the six religions adhered to by Indonesians and therefore eligible to be ticked on the ID card – Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism (since 2005), Hinduism, Islam and Protestantism. Anyone not adhering to one of these six, may chose ‘other’ to complete the ‘religion’ category, although we learned later of a post war Javanese spiritual movement, Sapta Darma, who are allowed to state this on their ID card. We heard of the efforts of ICRS to investigate the closure of over 100 churches during the last 2 years. Without being in possession of the full facts, it is not possible to speculate on the reasons behind the closures – were they due to non-compliance with the regulations governing the establishment of churches (60 families needed, for example, to support an application) or the apparent hostility of some local authorities, since such decisions had been devolved for determination from central to local government?

Wherever we went, we were received with broad smiles and generous hospitality, whether taking tea with the British Ambassador, who enthusiastically
brought us up to date with the advances made in freedom and democracy since the fall of Soeharto only 10 years ago, or sitting cross-legged on the floor with the villagers of Kotesan and hearing how they live out interfaith on a daily basis - with much good humoured banter and teasing of one another. Coming from a variety of cultures and faiths - Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Sapta Darma – they were rather bemused by the interest their village has attracted but nevertheless delighted to welcome those who came to learn of their experiences. A house destroyed by the earthquake two years ago had been rebuilt by all; everyone would be invited to share in their neighbours’ celebrations which take place after the various religious festivals; converts between religions were not unknown and several mixed faith marriages had taken place.

The Indonesians spoke with pride of the constitution and identified strongly with its aspirations for peaceful co-existence among the Indonesian brotherhood and unity in diversity. Clearly there are parts of this vast country where differences in religion are tolerated only with difficulty, but for the majority the desire to maintain the ideal of a religiously plural and diverse Indonesia, is genuine and something to be worked at, carefully nurtured and cherished.

Possible areas for future cooperation between Indonesia and the UK include:

- Provision of teachers of English in schools;
- Placements opportunities for MA and PhD students at the Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies and Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, both in Jogyakarta which offer courses of study in inter-religious dialogue, religion and local culture and religion and contemporary issues. Links could be made with St Philip’s Centre, Leicester, which runs a MA in Interreligious Relations in conjunction with the University of Birmingham.
- Exchange of imams and religious scholars for professional development– again Leicester would be able to provide exchange partners through The Islamic Foundation and contacts at St Philip’s Centre.
- Youth leadership exchange programmes – in conjunction with the Inter Cultural Communication and Leadership School.

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