

PERSPECTIVE

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Can an International State University of Confucianism be Established in Indonesia?

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FaceBook Page of Majelis Tinggi Agama Khonghucu Indonesia (Matakin or Supreme Council for the Confucian Religion in Indonesia) at <https://www.facebook.com/MATAKIN>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Joko Widodo administration recently announced plans to establish the International State University of Confucianism in Bangka Belitung province. This plan has however been strongly opposed by the local Aliansi Ulama Islam (Islamic Ulama Alliance, or AUI).
- Confucianism (*agama Khonghucu*) is one of the six officially recognised religions in Indonesia today. Suharto's New Order regime rescinded Confucianism's status as a state religion on the grounds that it would inhibit the assimilation of Chinese Indonesians into Indonesian society.
- The Abdurrahman Wahid administration was more sympathetic to Confucianism, and the relationship between the Supreme Council for the Confucian Religion in Indonesia (Matakin) and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) during that time was cordial.
- The proposed university for Confucianism in Indonesia would be a much-needed boost for the quality of textbooks and teachers for the religion, and for Indonesia's status as a democratic country that upholds religious freedom for minorities. However, prospects for the university are uncertain, given the opposition of the local Islamic group and possibly other conservative and radical Muslim forces in the country.
- The success of the plan to establish an International State University of Confucianism is probably contingent on whether Joko Widodo remains in power. Should a conservative Muslim politician be elected as the next president, it is unlikely that this university will be built.

INTRODUCTION

The Pancasila (meaning Five Principles) forms the backbone of the Indonesian state ideology. Religious freedom is assured through the first principle — “Belief in One Supreme God”. Although there is no specific religion that one needs to follow, the Indonesian government officially recognises only six religions, namely Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. In theory, these religions have equal status and treatment, and are included in the national religious education curriculum administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Confucianism, however, was the last to be included into the curriculum and is therefore the least developed. Qualified teachers of Confucianism have been greatly lacking.¹ The recently announced plan by the Joko Widodo administration to establish an International State University of Confucianism in Bangka Belitung province will definitely help enhance the quality of Confucianism education in the country.

BRIEF HISTORY OF CONFUCIANISM (*AGAMA KHONGHUCU*) IN INDONESIA

In 1965 — before Suharto came to power — Indonesia recognised Confucianism as one of the six official religions (*agama*). But before December 1963, Confucianism was called Khong Kaw Hwee (the Hokkien pronunciation of 孔教会) which means “Confucian religion association”.

The establishment of the Khong Kaw Hwee was linked to the Confucius Revival movement in mainland China under the leadership of Kang Youwei (康有为) and his disciple Chen Huanzhang (陈焕章).² In 1912, Chen set up Kong Jiao Hui (the Mandarin pronunciation of Khong Kaw Hwee 孔教会) in Shanghai. The Indonesian version was established in 1918 in Solo (Surakarta) by Peranakan Chinese and it had no formal links with the Kong Jiao Hui in China.

Prior to this, there was a Confucianist movement in Java represented by the Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan (THHK) organisation in Jakarta, which was established in 1900. Although THHK promoted Confucius teachings, it never institutionalised itself as a religious organisation.³ Instead, it functioned as an educational association promoting Chinese-medium schools, and by 1928, its focus had shifted from Confucian teachings to Chinese nationalism.⁴ Nevertheless, it should be noted that some of the concepts of Confucianism in Indonesia were developed during this time by Lie Kim Hok of the THHK, and these were later adopted by Khong Kaw Hwee.

Over time, Confucianism in Indonesia was influenced by Christianity, Islam and more importantly, the Indonesian language and culture — so much so that by 1963, Confucianism was no longer referred to as ‘*Khong Kawu*’ but ‘*Agama Khonghutju*’ (or ‘*Agama Khonghucu*’

after 1972). Up until 1965, during the Sukarno era, Confucianism was recognised by the Indonesian government as one of six official religions.

Soon after, the 930 movement (G-30-S) in 1965 caused the downfall of Sukarno, the dissolution of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or PKI) and the rise of General Suharto. According to the official version of history, the 930 movement was a coup attempt initiated by the PKI. Since communists were seen as atheists, the new regime considered anyone not following any religion to be communists or supporters of communism. They therefore required all Indonesians to profess a religion.

AGAMA KHONGHUCU DURING THE SUHARTO ERA

In 1967, Gabungan Perkumpulan Agama Khonghucu Se-Indonesia (the Indonesian name of Khong Kauw Hwee that was adopted in December 1964) became the Majelis Tinggi Agama Khonghucu Indonesia (Indonesia's Supreme Council of the Confucian Religion, abbreviated as Matakín). This entailed the formalisation of Confucianism as an institutionalised religion and required the enshrining of components common to other officially recognised religions in Indonesia, namely having one Supreme God (*Tian* or *Thian* 天), a prophet (Khonghucu or *Kong Zi* 孔子), a religious text (*Su Si* or *Kitab yang Empat*), a Confucian church called *Litang* (*Lithang* 礼堂), and priesthood (three categories of Confucians — *Kauw Sing* (教生), *Bun Su* (文师) and *Hak Su* (学师)).

This remodelled Confucianism in Indonesia into an organised religion (*agama*), conforming to the first principle of the Pancasila — belief in one Supreme God. A similar transformation and Indonesianisation also occurred in the case of Buddhism. As Buddhism did not originally have the concept of one Supreme God, it only became an organised religion (*agama*) by adopting the concept of *Adi Buddha* as the equivalent of Supreme God.⁵ Many Chinese Indonesians, especially the Indonesian-speaking Peranakan Chinese, have become adherents of *Agama Khonghucu* in order to retain their Chinese identity.

When the Suharto government first came to power, it wanted to mobilise all religious forces to combat the 'atheist' PKI. Therefore, *Agama Khonghucu* was embraced.⁶ Nevertheless, in the 1977 general elections, Golkar won another landslide victory, indicating that the Suharto government had consolidated its power and no longer needed the support of *Agama Khonghucu* followers. The government went for total assimilation, and in perceiving Confucianism as an obstacle to the assimilation of the Chinese Indonesians, decided to de-recognise Confucianism, arguing that Confucianism was not a religion even in China.⁷ In February 1979, the Matakín had to cancel its congress after failing to gain a permit for gathering.

Followers of *Agama Khonghucu* now chose to reflect themselves in their Indonesian identity cards as professing Buddhism. In 1995, towards the end of the Suharto rule, some Confucianists started to rebel against the government decision. One young couple even sued the chief of East Java Civil Registration Office in Surabaya for his office's refusal to register a

Confucian marriage.⁸ The high-profile court case attracted national attention, including that of Abdurrahman Wahid (also known as Gus Dur) — then the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) — who was sympathetic to the followers of Confucianism. However, the court concluded in favour of the chief of Civil Registration Office.

Despite the derecognition of Confucianism, the Matakín leadership managed to maintain good ties with the moderate Muslim community such as the NU, so much so that towards the end of the Suharto rule, Matakín was allowed to hold its 1998 annual congress at a hall within the Ministry of Religious Affairs office. The hall was usually reserved for Muslim pilgrimage gatherings.⁹

AGAMA KHONGHUCU AFTER THE FALL OF SUHARTO

Only after the fall of Suharto did *Agama Khonghucu* become officially recognised again. Nevertheless, the number of Confucianists has drastically declined. In 1971, the Indonesian census showed that only 0.7 per cent of the Indonesian population was registered as Confucianists. In the 2020 Census, the number had dropped even further, to 0.05 per cent.¹⁰

Since the era of Reformasi, Matakín has become active again. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has also begun to pay attention to *Agama Khonghucu*, including preparing textbooks on the religion. However, the long suppression has led to a shortage of well-researched textbooks and qualified teachers. In 2013, towards the end of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's presidency, it was reported that the plan to establish a Confucian university was mooted. Nothing materialised, however, and it was only during the Joko Widodo presidency that the plan resurfaced. It has however encountered opposition from conservative and radical Muslims.

Despite the opposition, Chinese Indonesians, especially the Peranakan Chinese, set up a foundation to establish a privately funded college of Confucianism (Sekolah Tinggi Khonghucu Indonesia, or STIKIN) to train and churn out qualified religious teachers in Confucianism. Although their initial plan to establish STIKIN in Semarang failed, they were able to obtain a permit to build the college in Purwokerto, Central Java. The Secretary-General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Nizar Ali, attended the inaugural ceremony in February 2021.¹¹ This private college is headed by Suharjono Tan, a Chinese Indonesian.¹² Currently, it has only 38 students, and it is difficult to assess if the college will become a major institution. However, once the International State University of Confucianism is established, the quality of Confucian education in Indonesia should improve. The prestige of such a university will likely attract more and better resources.

THE DECISION TO ESTABLISH THE UNIVERSITY

On 13 April 2022, the governor of Bangka-Belitung (Babel) province, Erzaldi Rosman Djohan, announced that President Joko Widodo had selected the province as the centre for developing Confucian education due to its reputation for enjoying “highest degree of religious harmony in Indonesia”.¹³ He also revealed that, prior to Lunar New Year 2022, he and the leadership of the Matakín had met the President who expressed his hope that an International State University of Confucianism (Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Internasional Agama Khonghucu, abbreviated as PTN Khonghucu) should be established by 2023. It was reported that the government has allocated two plots of land for this purpose.¹⁴ Once established, this would be the only Confucian religion university in the world, and would attract global attention.¹⁵ The initiative to establish such a university shows that the Indonesian government is moving towards acknowledging “religious citizenship” — or the state recognition of religious minorities.¹⁶

The establishment of this state-funded international university of Confucianism had in fact been decided in 2019.¹⁷ However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government could only offer a plot of land of 2.9 hectares to the Bangka-Belitung government in April 2022 for the university campus.¹⁸ According to local officials, the government has also prepared the budget for foundational works to begin in 2023.

This decision was opposed by the local Aliansi Ulama Islam (Islamic Ulama Alliance, AUI) of the Bangka-Belitung province, coordinated by Firman Saladin.¹⁹ On 31 May 2022, they went to the provincial parliament to lodge their dissatisfaction and threatened to launch a movement mobilising Muslim followers if the central government did not accept their demand.

OPPOSITION AND SUPPORT FOR PTN KHONGHUCU

According to various reports, the objection of the ulama against the building of the PTN Khonghucu was based on the following arguments: Bangka-Belitung province comprises of a Muslim majority population. If PTN Khonghucu were to be built, students from China and other foreign countries would come to the province to study, which would offer an opportunity for Chinese students to migrate to Indonesia and affect the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, which would sour the good relationship between the two communities.²⁰

The AUI suggested that such a university should instead be established in West Kalimantan where there is a large ethnic Chinese population.²¹ However, they failed to mention that Chinese Indonesians form the second largest group in the Bangka-Belitung province. Interestingly, AUI claimed that their rejection was not due to ‘hatred’ but to their love ‘for religious harmony’.²²

The Indonesian public has been divided on this issue. While some agree with the views of AUI, others support the establishment of PTN Khonghucu in Bangka-Belitung. Those who agree with AUI are mainly conservative and radical Muslims, while those who oppose AUI tend to be moderate Muslims, intellectuals, Chinese Indonesians, and social media personalities. For instance, a social media influencer Ade Armando who has 1.8 million followers on his Cokro TV programme,²³ maintained that Indonesia is a democratic country based on Pancasila and that Confucianism is one of the religions recognised by the government; thus, Confucianism deserves to be treated fairly. He emphasised that, since the central government has established an International Islamic University of Depok in West Java, establishing a PTN Khonghucu, which is also an international university, appears to be a natural and logical move. This would also enhance the status of Indonesia among the international academic community. Likewise, the influx of Chinese students to study at the PTN Khonghucu should be welcome and would benefit Indonesia both culturally and economically. Addressing the argument that Chinese nationals would migrate to Bangka-Belitung province in large waves, Armando pointed out the absurdity of it. In Armando's view, anti-PTN Khonghucu sentiments are based on exclusivism and xenophobia, and these should not be encouraged. He urged the central government to not abandon the plan to establish the PTN Khonghucu just because of the opposition of a few Islamic clergymen.

Perhaps the most interesting argument was put forward in an open letter written by Herza, a young lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the Bangka-Belitung University.²⁴ Herza is an indigenous Muslim who graduated from the Bangka-Belitung University and received a master's degree from Waseda University in Japan. He presented an academic argument using the notion of "Homo Sacer" as argued by an Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.²⁵

In the letter, Herza likened the Chinese community in Indonesia to a homo sacer — a person of the minority group whose political right is deprived²⁶ by the religious and political elite of the majority group who collaborate to remove the political right of the minority group. Herza criticised the AUI, alluding that their actions resemble those of the elite described by Agamben.

Herza also highlighted that in the Bangka-Belitung province where the Muslim population form the majority, there is more than one state-run Islamic university and the Muslims there can enjoy the freedom to express, perform and practice their religion. However, the Chinese, who form the second largest population in the province, do not have a single Confucian university. Thus, they do not have the opportunity to learn about their religion in depth and as a result, they do not have sufficient knowledge about their own religion.

Herza argued that the freedom to enjoy life in accordance with one's religion is the political right of any citizen in a democratic country, thus a Confucianist should be allowed to receive religious education on Confucianism. He further posited that "the Chinese in Bangka-Belitung are not new migrants. They have been in these areas since the 18th century for many generations.

Nevertheless, the nature of the proposed Confucian university is unclear: will it merely teach Confucius philosophy and Chinese religious thoughts, or also secular subjects? From official statements, it can be assumed that the government leans towards the former. If this turns out to

be the case, the university would be very specialised and unique — which forms the basis of the opposition of the AUI. However, even if the proposed university offers secular subjects, it is doubtful that the response of the AUI would have been any different.

Will the PTN Khonghucu be eventually established? It appears that the realisation of this plan is contingent upon Joko Widodo being in power. In other words, the university should be built before Joko Widodo steps down. If not, should a conservative Muslim politician be elected as the new president, it is unlikely that this university will be built anytime in the near future.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Jokowi Tunjuk Bangka Belitung Jadi Pusat Pengembangan Pendidikan Konghucu [Jokowi Appoints Bangka Belitung as Center for Confucian Education Development]”, *VOI*, 13 April 2022 <<https://voi.id/berita/157225/jokowi-tunjuk-bangka-belitung-jadi-pusat-pengembangan-pendidikan-konghucu>>(accessed 31 August 2022).

² “(张颂之) 孔教会始末汇考 - 儒家网 [(Zhang Songzhi) An examination of the beginning and end of the Confucian Church]”, *Rujiazg*, <<https://www.rujiazg.com/article/5951>>(accessed 11 August 2022).

³ For a detailed discussion on the THHK movement and its relationship with Confucius, see Kwee Tek Hoay, “Atsal Moelanja Pergerakan Tionghoa Modern di Jawa” (The Origins of Modern Chinese Movement in Java), *Moestika Romans*, 1936-38. Reprinted in *Kesastraan Melayu Tionghoa dan Kebangsaan Indonesia: Empat Karya Kwee Tek Hoay*, Jilid 4, Jakarta: KGP, 2001, pp. 395-534.

⁴ Tio Ie Soei, *Lie Kim Hok 1853–1912*, Bandung, Good Luck, C. 1959, p. 65.

⁵ Iem Brown, “Contemporary Indonesian Buddhism and Monotheism”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no.1 (March 1987), p. 110.

⁶ Leo Suryadinata, *The Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia*, Singapore: Times Book International, 1997, pp. 161–62.

⁷ There are two schools of thought on Confucianism in China, one school considers Confucianism (Ru Jiao 儒教) as a religion as there were numerous Kong Miao (孔庙 the Confucian temple), while the other regarded it as a philosophy (哲学) or social teachings (Ru Xue, 儒学). The teachings, organisation and practice in Ru Jiao in China are different from those are proposed by Matakini. For a concise study on Confucianism in Indonesia, see Liao Jianyu, *Yinni Kongjiao Chutan* (印尼孔教初探, A preliminary Study of Indonesian Confucian Religion). Singapore : CHC 2010.

⁸ For a brief description of this case, see Leo Suryadinata, *Peranakan Chinese Identities: In The Globalizing Malay Archipelago*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2022, p. 200.

⁹ Chandra Setiawan, *The History of Confucian Religion in Indonesia*, Jakarta: Matakini, (pamphlet), no publication date.

¹⁰ “Agama [Religion]”, *Laman Resmi Republik Indonesia* < <https://indonesia.go.id/profil/agama>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹¹ Y Prayogo, “Sekolah Tinggi Konghucu Indonesia (STIKIN) Pertama Diresmikan di Purwokerto [First Indonesian Confucian College (STIKIN) Inaugurated in Purwokerto]”, *Kaldera News*, 20 February 2021 <<https://www.kalderanews.com/2021/02/sekolah-tinggi-konghucu-indonesia-stikin-pertama-diresmikan-di-purwokerto/>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹² Cokie Sutrisno, “Diresmikan, Sekolah Tinggi Khonghucu Pertama di Indonesia Ada di Purwokerto [https://lensabanyumas.pikiran-rakyat.com/banyumasan/pr-241462881/diresmikan-sekolah-tinggi-khonghucu-pertama-di-indonesia-ada-di-purwokerto]”, *Lensa Banyumas*, 19 February 2021

<<https://lensabanyumas.pikiran-rakyat.com/banyumasan/pr-241462881/diresmikan-sekolah-tinggi-khonghucu-pertama-di-indonesia-ada-di-purwokerto>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹³ “Jokowi Tunjuk Bangka Belitung Jadi Pusat Pengembangan Pendidikan Konghucu [Jokowi Appoints Bangka Belitung as Center for Confucian Education Development]”, *VOI*, 13 April 2022 <<https://voi.id/berita/157225/jokowi-tunjuk-bangka-belitung-jadi-pusat-pengembangan-pendidikan-konghucu>>(accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁴ These two areas are: Tanjung Bunga and Kejora with a land area of 4.5 hectares. But later it was revealed that the university will be built at Batu Berlubang, on 2.9 hectares.

¹⁵ Yudi Wahyono, “Pemerintah RI Tunjuk Bangka Belitung Sebagai Tempat Pendidikan Agama Khonghucu Dunia [The Government of Indonesia Appoints Bangka Belitung as a World Confucian Religious Education Place]” *Sonara*, 19 May 2022

<<https://bangka.sonora.id/read/503287287/pemerintah-ri-tunjuk-bangka-belitung-sebagai-tempat-pendidikan-agama-khonghucu-dunia>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁶ For a discussion on the concept of “Religious Citizenship”, see Lyn Parker and Chang Yao Hoon, “Secularity, Religion and the possibilities for Religious Citizenship”, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 41 (2013) pp. 150-174.

¹⁷ “Pembangunan PTN Khonghucu di Bangka Tengah Ditolak Kelompok Masyarakat [Community Group Rejects Construction of Confucian State University in Central Bangka]”, *Kompas*, 02 June 2022 <<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/06/02/110345378/pembangunan-ptn-khonghucu-di-bangka-tengah-ditolak-kelompok-masyarakat>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁸ “Lahan Telah Siap, PTN Khonghucu Pertama di Indonesia Dibangun di Babel [Land Ready, First Confucian State University in Indonesia Built in Babel]”, *Kompas*, 07 June 2022 <

<https://www.kompas.com/properti/read/2022/06/07/173000721/lahan-telah-siap-ptn-khonghucu-pertama-di-indonesia-dibangun-di-babel?page=all>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁹ Gerkanpis, “Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Konghucu Terancam Dibatalkan | Cindy Florencine [Konghucu State College is Threatened to Cancel | Cindy Florencine]”, *YouTube* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnBV55_091A&ab_channel=Gerakanpis (accessed 31 August 2022). It is revealed in this video that Firman Saladin was a leader of the banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and has advocated the establishment of the Khilafah (caliphate) via his twitter: “Bersatu dalam satu barisan membangkitkan kembali perisai ummat islam #BersamaPerjuangkanKhilafah #qiyu [Unite as one to revive the shield of the Islamic ummah]” <<https://twitter.com/SaladinFirman/status/1242341054772207617>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

²⁰ “Soal Penolakan Berdirinya PTN Konghucu: Bukan Benci, Tapi... [Regarding the Rejection of the Establishment of the Confucian State University: Not Hate, But...]”, *Babelpos*, 02 June 2022 <<https://babelpos.sumeks.co/2022/06/02/soal-penolakan-berdirinya-ptn-konghucu-bukan-benci-tapi/>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

²¹ “Pembangunan PTN Khonghucu di Bangka Tengah Ditolak Kelompok Masyarakat [Community Group Rejects Construction of Confucian State University in Central Bangka]”, *Kompas*, 02 June 2022 <<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/06/02/110345378/pembangunan-ptn-khonghucu-di-bangka-tengah-ditolak-kelompok-masyarakat>>(accessed 31 August 2022).

²² Cici Nasya Nita “Aliansi Umat Islam Babel Menolak Rencana Didirikan PTN Khonghucu di Bangka Belitung [Babel Muslim Alliance Rejects Plan to Establish Confucian State University in Bangka Belitung]”, *Bangkapos*, 31 May 2022, <<https://bangka.tribunnews.com/2022/05/31/aliansi-umat-islam-babel-menolak-rencana-didirikan-ptn-khonghucu-di-bangka-belitung>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

²³ The TV program first aired on 8 June 2022.

²⁴ “Menemukan Harapan Dan Semangat Baru Di Kampus Biru Universitas Bangka Belitung [Finding Hope and New Spirit at the Blue Campus of Bangka Belitung University]” *1001 Biografi Motivasi*, 3 November 2016 <<https://1001biografimotivasi.wordpress.com/2016/11/03/menemukan-harapan-dan-semangat-baru-di-kampus-biru-universitas-bangka-belitung/>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

²⁵ Herza “Tertanggalnya Hak Politis Warga Tionghoa Bangka Belitung” [The Political Rights of the Chinese Citizens of Bangka Belitung have been deprived]”, *Detik News*, 28 June 2022 <<https://news.detik.com/kolom/d-6151359/tertanggalnya-hak-politis-warga-tionghoa-bangka-belitung>> (accessed 31 August 2022); See also Herza, “Kita yang Non-Tionghoa dan Khonghucu di Bangka Belitung Semestinya Mendukung! [We Non-Chinese and Confucians in Bangka Belitung Should Support!]”, *TIMES Indonesia*, 28 June 2022 <<https://www.timesindonesia.co.id/read/news/416240/kita-yang-nontionghoa-dan-konghucu-di-bangka-belitung-semestinya-mendukung>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

²⁶ [Homo sacer - Oxford Reference](#); To be sure, Herza does offer his own interpretation of Homo Sacer.

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