

Associated Baptist Press

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May 27, 1998

(98-38)

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Violence stops in Indonesia, but future remains uncertain

JAKARTA, Indonesia (ABP) -- The resignation of Indonesia's president ended a week of rioting in the world's fourth-largest nation, but observers adopted a wait-and-see attitude about whether a new leader will bring stability and how leadership changes will affect a large Christian minority in the predominantly Muslim land.

"A little over half" of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's personnel assigned to Indonesia left the country during recent violent demonstrations and looting, said Keith Parks, global-missions coordinator for the Atlanta-based organization.

Parks said individual missionary families were allowed to decide for themselves whether to leave or stay. "CBF personnel assigned to the unreached people groups in this nation value your prayers for them and appeal for prayers for this nation and her people," said Parks, who served as a missionary in Indonesia from 1954 to 1968.

Baptist Press reported May 18 that Southern Baptist Convention personnel were considering whether to evacuate and that two or three families were scheduled to leave May 15. A spokesman said May 27 that no new information was available on workers representing the SBC's International Mission Board in Indonesia.

Other missions organizations took similar precautions, according to Evangelical Press. New Tribes Missions evacuated all missionaries from the capital city of Jakarta into other parts of Indonesia, while some Church Missionary Society workers chose to remain in Indonesia despite the turmoil.

Widespread celebration followed Indonesian President Suharto's May 21 resignation, ending 32 years of autocratic rule. The nation's problems are far from over, however, observers say. Under opposition pressure, new president B.J. Habibie pledged to hold elections "as soon as possible," rather than attempting to serve out the remaining five years of Suharto's term.

A longtime member of Suharto's regime, Habibie is "of the same mind set" as the former president, Parks said. One observer described Habibie as a staunch Muslim and "not at all pro-Christian."

One worker in Indonesia said reaction to Habibie's presidency was mixed. One missions organization issued its highest alert on hearing about the new president while another lowered its alert status one level, said the missionary, who asked that neither he nor the tribal group he works with be identified.

The worker said there is a strong movement to make Indonesia a religious state, which would hinder work among Christians.

About 10 percent of Indonesia's 200 million citizens are Christians. While past riots have targeted churches, recent violence was aimed at ethnic Chinese, who comprise about 5 percent of the population but own 70 percent of the nation's wealth.

Still, religious fervor fueled the violence as Muslim rioters shouted "Allah is great" while looting and burning shopping malls, restaurants and banks, one witness reported. The rioters believed God was honored by their attack on Chinese scapegoats, many of whom are Christians, Evangelical Press quoted a source as saying.

The riots were sparked by austerity measures taken by the Suharto government and the May 12 killing of six university students by police.

Officials say more than 500 people died in a looting and arson spree. At least 56 have been reported missing, according to Associated Press.

Randy Sprinkle, intercessory prayer leader for the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, urged Baptists to "ask God to use this crisis to help people realize their spiritual emptiness and pray that believers would not be intimidated but instead would boldly witness to their neighbors and friends about their need for Christ."

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-- By Bob Allen

Baptist college settles lawsuit alleging financial-aid violations

MT. VERNON, Ga. (ABP) -- Following months of negotiations and changes in its top leadership, a Georgia Baptist college has reached an out-of-court settlement with federal officials over claims the school misused federal scholarship funds.

Brewton-Parker College in Mt. Vernon, Ga., will repay \$4 million in federal funds over the next two years, The Christian Index, a Georgia Baptist newspaper, reported May 21. A cash payment of \$2 million is due within 30 days, the remainder will be paid out in eight quarterly installments, according to terms of the settlement.

In exchange, the U.S. Department of Education will drop all claims in a lawsuit originally filed by a former employee. In the suit, Martha Faw, former assistant financial-aid director, claimed Brewton-Parker administrators gave scholarships to unqualified students for at least 11 years. When she attempted to correct the problem, she was fired, she claimed.

The federal government joined Faw's suit last year. Faw, who stands to receive payments from a wrongful-termination settlement as well as for her role as a "whistle blower" in the larger federal suit, plans to donate more than \$200,000 to establish a scholarship fund, according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Lynn Holmes, the college's popular president, resigned last year because of the scandal. He was replaced April 25 by David Smith, currently an administrator at Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas, who begins his new job June 1.

Initial news reports said the suit could end up costing the college \$25.2 million in reimbursement and penalties, an amount nearly twice the school's annual budget.

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-- By ABP staff

First non-Baptist president named at Eastern Seminary

WYNNEWOOD, Pa. (ABP) -- Trustees of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary elected acting president Scott Rodin as the school's permanent president in May.

Rodin, a Presbyterian, is the first non-Baptist to lead the 73-year-old American Baptist seminary in Wynnewood, Pa.

Rodin has been acting president since last July, when his predecessor, Manfred Brauch, resigned to return to teaching.

Rodin came to the seminary in 1993 as vice president for advancement and as an adjunct professor of theology and ethics. He is a graduate of University of Washington/Seattle with a master's degree and a doctorate from King's College/University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

Rodin said he is committed to preserving the school's Baptist heritage and strengthening its role "as a premier Baptist seminary." He also emphasized the need to understand "just how ecumenical our world is and how important it will be for the seminary to build bridges both within and across denominational lines," according to American Baptist News Service.

Eastern, one of nine seminaries related to the 1.5-million-member American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., has about 450 students.

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-- By ABP staff

Civil-rights panel discusses religion and public schools

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- While disputes over religious expression in public schools have diminished in recent years, school officials and parents still need more education on the topic, witnesses told the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Fifteen religious and civil-liberties leaders addressed the commission May 20 at its first-ever hearing on religion in the public schools. The commission will hold a second hearing on the issue June 12 in New York City and a third hearing June 23 at a site to be determined.

The commission is expected to release a report by the end of the year that will detail findings and make recommendations to the administration and to Congress.

Michelle Doyle, liaison to the religious community on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, said guidelines distributed by the agency to school officials in 1995 led to a drop in religious-liberty disputes.

"Schools may not discriminate against private religious expression by students, but must instead give students the same right to engage in religious activity and discussion as they have to engage in other comparable activity," Doyle said.

"At the same time, schools may not endorse religious activity or doctrine, nor may they coerce participation in religious activity," she added.

Oliver Thomas, special counsel for religious and civil liberties at the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., said significant progress has been made in how religion is treated in public schools.

"Certainly, problems of compliance remain on both ends of the spectrum," Thomas said. "Some districts continue to promote religion while others persist in discriminating against it. But overall, the Equal Access Act, First Amendment and related laws are being implemented and adhered to in a manner that surpasses that of any previous period in our history."

"The most important work remaining is education, not litigation," Thomas said.

Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, also testified. Thomas and Haynes are working together in Alabama to train teachers about the proper role of religion in public schools after a judge there ordered schools to cease sponsoring religious activities.

"We have discovered that when tried, the First Amendment works," Haynes said, adding that "for too much of history, extremists have dominated this debate."

Haynes said improvements are needed, however. He said schools should remain neutral in matters of faith but should not ignore religion in textbooks and debates. "Ignoring is not neutral," he said.

Haynes suggested that schools include studies about religions and textbook publishers be encouraged to include substantial and accurate treatment of religion.

Haynes also suggested that schools implement a comprehensive religious-liberty policy before a crisis arises. Too often, schools have a "sleeping-dog-lie approach to management" in the area of religious liberty, he said.

Steven McFarland, director of Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said "much is healthy" about religion in the schools but urged the panel to look at areas where he said there exists "discrimination against religious expression."

McFarland cited examples including weekend use of school facilities, religious discrimination in the selection of student leaders and discrimination against low-income people who wish to educate children from a religious world view with help from taxpayer funded vouchers.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said that contrary to claims of the Religious Right, rampant discrimination against Christians does not exist in public schools.

"Bluntly, the problem is not that religious students are not allowed to be faithful witnesses," he said. "It is that some students and special-interest groups want school officials to promote, enhance, or otherwise 'bless' such religious conduct."

"Schools are constantly being pressured by religious groups to provide so-called 'equal treatment' for creationism or to adopt books and curriculum that are slanted toward a Christian world-view," Lynn said.

Elliot Minberg, vice president and legal director of People For the American Way Foundation, said inaccurate statements by politicians poses a new threat to the religious liberty of students.

Minberg cited a statement made by House Speaker Newt Gingrich on a Sunday morning talk show in 1995 that it is currently illegal for a student to say grace for a meal in a school cafeteria.

"That is completely wrong, of course, but when the Speaker of the House says it on national television, it is no wonder that some teachers and principals are confused," Minberg said. "More public education on religious liberty and less misinformation from the Religious Right would be more helpful."

"Students are allowed to voluntarily pray throughout the day -- before school, during recess, before a math class, during lunch or other times," Minberg said. "They are free to write about their religious faith, where relevant, in their classroom assignments or even in the student newspaper."

Constitutional amendment sponsor saluted with 'equine posterior award'

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- People for the American Way dedicated a mock "equine posterior award" to Rep. Ernest Istook for sponsoring his proposed Religious Freedom Amendment to the Constitution.

Columnist Molly Ivins presented the award, a bronze replica of a horse's backside, at the Washington-based civil-liberties group's first Defenders of Democracy luncheon. A description of the award said it was created to "honor that leader whose abilities to misrepresent an issue, manipulate his/her followers and pander to our baser instincts, reach such ridiculous levels that we don't know whether to laugh or cry.

"In other words, a genuine horse's patootie."

In a brief response issued by Istook, the Oklahoma Republican did not seem to appreciate the humor behind the dubious honor.

"I thought the extreme left preached tolerance and diversity, but they must think those apply to everyone but them," Istook said. "The vast majority of Americans who support voluntary school prayer and religious freedom probably don't appreciate being compared to a horse's backside," Istook said.

The \$20,000 statue was designed by American artist Robert Rauschenberg and cast in bronze by Robert Graham, sculptor of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. PFAW plans to donate the sculpture to the Oklahoma City Art Museum.

Comedian Paula Poundstone accepted the award on Istook's behalf.

Istook's amendment would secure that "the people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed."

Civil-liberties groups oppose the amendment because they say it would violate the separation of church and state. Supporters say it is needed to correct decades of court rulings which have eroded religious freedom.

On a more serious note at the luncheon attended by nearly 500 people, PFAW presented two Defenders of Democracy Awards. One winner was National Association for the Advancement of Colored People President Kweisi Mfume. The NAACP and PFAW are cooperating in an effort to defeat education-voucher initiatives, which would use public funds to help pay tuition at private and parochial schools.

In presenting the award, PFAW President Carole Shields, daughter of Southern Baptist figure Grady Cothen, said, "My dad and I are the kind of Baptists who pray like this: 'God help me to seek the truth but spare me the company of those who have found it.'"

Also awarded was Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass. "When some in Congress try to pass bumper-sticker legislation, it undermines the Constitution and endangers basic rights," he said.

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