

Men in Indonesia use Islam to justify polygamous ways

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JAKARTA, Indonesia — A suspicious cell phone number on the family phone bill tipped off Titin Salpomiati that her husband, Erlangga, was cheating on her.

When confronted, Erlangga claimed the woman in question was just a friend. But a year later, he felt he couldn't hide the truth. He told Titin he had taken a second wife and they had a newborn.

"She was furious. She cried. She protested," he recalled.

Erlangga, a personnel manager in a palm-oil company who goes by one name, said he argued that the Quran allows him to have up to four wives. Titin recalled accusing him of exploiting the Quran to justify his sexual wandering.

While he has two wives, Titin said, "I don't feel that I have a husband."

Titin and Erlangga, both 46, came of age at a time when the authoritarian government of longtime President Suharto discouraged conservative expressions of Islam. Although polygamy is legal, Suharto, under pressure from his wife, virtually banned civil servants from engaging in the practice in the early 1980s. Indonesia's Islamic and general family codes also set strict conditions for polygamy, including permission from the first wife.

BUT TODAY, five years after mass protests forced Suharto out of office, some Muslim activists seek to establish a society that follows traditional, conservative interpretations of the Quran, as well as to bring about Islamic law, or sharia.

High-profile polygamists are extolling the practice. Progressive clerics and feminists are countering with interpretations of the Quran that support equality of the sexes. An official in the religious affairs ministry is drafting an alternative Islamic family code that would outlaw polygamy and make it easier for women to divorce.

The debate is part of a broader struggle to define the role of Islam in Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population.

No government agency accurately tracks polygamy rates. But ministry officials said many more men marry privately, in the presence of a Muslim cleric and witnesses, without seeking permission from an Islamic court, which would require permission from the first wife.

Counselors at women's crisis centers report more women seeking help in dealing with polygamous marriages. The topic is increasingly in the news and debated on talk shows. The vice president, Hamzah Haz, openly acknowledges he has three wives. The minister of cooperatives, Alimarwan

Hanan, has two wives. President Megawati Sukarnoputri has not given her views publicly; she herself is the daughter of her father's second wife.

Eccentric entrepreneur Puspo Wardoyo, who has four wives and owns the popular restaurant chain Ayam Bakar Wong Solo, elevated polygamy to new prominence in July when he staged the first Polygamy Awards. He handed out 90 statuettes and cash prizes to men from across Indonesia who had at least two wives.

"I want to spread the polygamy virus," he said.

"**I WAS VERY** angry," acknowledged Titin, a petite, personable woman, during an interview at a Dunkin' Donuts shop. "But I have to accept this dilemma in order to maintain my children." Erlangga splits his week between Titin and his second wife, Mardiana, in two small houses about four miles apart.

Titin and her friends commiserate with one another about their husbands' use of religion to suit their sexual desires, and about how polygamy hurts their children, not just themselves. Titin's 9-year-old daughter often asks where her daddy is, but Titin said she would tell her the truth only when she is older. Her 19-year-old son already knows.

Her sense of betrayal is never far from the surface. "I can accept him, but with a lot of question marks and exclamation points and commas — never a period."

Erlangga said he never expected to have more than one wife, even though his father had three and his grandfather two. And he truly loved Titin, whom he wed in 1983. But 13 years and two children later, he fell in love with Mardiana, now 37, a widow.

HE FEELS HE is a better Muslim for helping a widow without financial means. He acknowledged that most women object to polygamy, but "a woman should accept that it is part of the religious institution of marriage in Islam."

Erlangga said that in the days of Suharto, men took more than one wife but kept it hidden longer. "Now, it's in the open," he said. "Now there's no fear."

Polygamy is mostly a lower- to lower-middle-class phenomenon. For middle-class women, especially the college-educated, the humiliation is particularly acute if their husbands marry again.

Women who accept a polygamous mate often do so for financial reasons. Last year, Neneng, 23, a Jakarta housemaid, became the second wife of Makmur, 30, who drives a motorized rickshaw.

"It is better being a second wife rather than staying single for my whole life," she said. "At least I am economically secure now."