

Indonesia: Rally for moderate Islam halted over fears of violence

Some 70,000 members were on their way to Yogyakarta for the rally to launch inter-faith movement to counter 'extremism'.

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Hizb ut-Tahrir followers shout slogans during a rally in Jakarta in 2015 [Tatan Syuflana/AP]

Organisers of an Indonesian movement to promote a moderate brand of Islam cancelled a mass rally after its youth supporters burned the flag of an outlawed hard line Muslim group, sparking allegations of blasphemy.

The rally in Yogyakarta, predicted to draw 100,000 people, was stopped to prevent violence, said Yahya Cholil Staquf, general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation.

Video of members of Nahdlatul Ulama's youth arm burning the flag of the outlawed group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, has stirred controversy in Indonesia because the flag is also emblazoned with the Islamic declaration of faith.

Staquf said Hizb ut-Tahrir "operatives" disrupted the youth wing's celebrations and exploited religious symbols, which led to the flag burning incident. He said the campaign of "provocation and sabotage" was widely believed to be directed by political forces hoping to influence the outcome of Indonesia's presidential election in April.

Some 70,000 members of Ansor, Nahdlatul Ulama's youth arm, had been on their way to Yogyakarta for the rally to coincide with the launch of an interfaith movement that aims to counter extremism globally.

"Further incidents of provocation were planned. Our members would find it difficult to control their anger in the face of such flagrant exploitation of our religious symbols," said Staquf.

The image of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, as being religiously moderate was undermined last year when the minority Christian governor of the capital, Jakarta, was imprisoned for blasphemy following street protests against him that drew hundreds of thousands.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, which seeks a global caliphate, was banned by the Indonesian government last year.

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