

Uproar over flag-burning reaches new heights

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Reaction: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) youth wing GP Ansor chairman Yaqut Cholil Qoumas (left) holds a press briefing on Wednesday to respond to a recent burning of a black flag bearing an Islamic creed allegedly by members of NU's Barisan Ansor Serbaguna (Banser) youth wing. GP Ansor said it would give a stern warning to Banser members, but has maintained that the flag was the flag of the banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and that, therefore, burning it was not an act of blasphemy. (The Jakarta Post/Dhoni Setiawan)

The uproar surrounding a recent flag-burning incident reached new heights on Friday, with thousands of conservative Muslims demanding the prosecution of three men who burned a flag bearing an Islamic creed.

Islamic groups took to the streets on Friday, calling the government and law enforcers to take legal action against the members of Banser – the civilian security unit under Islamic group Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)'s Ansor youth wing — who burned the flag bearing the text *shahada*. The group said the flag belonged to the banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) hard-line group.

Shahada is an Islamic creed and the declaration of belief that Allah is the one and only God and that Prophet Muhammad is God's messenger.

The protesters, who staged a rally in front of the office of Coordinating Political, Legal and Security Affairs Minister Wiranto, carried the black and white flag and chanted the Islamic creed, while decrying the burning, calling it unacceptable and an insult to all Muslims.

Yusuf Martak, the chairman of the National Movement to Safeguard Fatwas (GNPF), which participated in the protest, said before the crowd of protesters that Banser's action had divided the Muslim community.

“If the government doesn't want to appear as anti-Islam or doesn't take sides with ulemas, please prove that [the flag-burning] was wrong and cannot be tolerated,” Yusuf said on Friday.

In the past few days, Muslim groups and Islamic authorities, including the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), have criticized Banser for the incident.

Banser, whose members burned the flag after taking it down after an individual had raised it during National Santri Day celebrations in Garut on Monday, refused to apologize for the incident on the grounds that the flag belonged to the banned Islamist group, but the flag burners themselves did apologize, saying the incident was spontaneous and did not reflect their organization's views.

The police questioned the three Banser members but have released them. The man who raised the flag, Uus Sukmana, faces a possible sentence of three weeks in jail for disrupting a public gathering, according to Article 174 of the Criminal Code.

Muchsin Alatas, an executive with the hard-line Islam Defenders Front (FPI), demanded that Ansor chairman Yaqut Cholil Qoumas be prosecuted for the flag-burning incident, while also demanding that Wiranto arrange a meeting among NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj, Yaqut and Banser executives.

Yusuf and Muchsin, along with five other protesters, were received by Wiranto's secretary, Lt. Gen. Agus Surya Bakti. Wiranto was in Palu, Central Sulawesi, to discuss post-earthquake reconstruction with local administrations.

After the meeting, Agus and the delegation representing the protesters addressed the crowd together. However, the participants of the rally expressed disappointment over Wiranto's absence.

Thousands of Muslim groups from Surakarta, Central Java, also held a protest in Klaten, condemning the incident while carrying *tauhid* flags as they marched to the Klaten Police headquarters. They urged the police to punish the perpetrators.

The incident has sparked fears of sectarian strife in the country ahead of the 2019 presidential election.

Hasanuddin Ali, a political analyst from the Alvara Research Center, said the government had learned from a case in which former Jakarta governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama was convicted of blasphemy followed a string of sectarian rallies that contributed to a divisive Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017.

Although officials had acted swiftly to prevent the flag-burning incident from spiralling into a major security issue, the government still needed to intensify communications with the different groups that demanded prosecution, he said.

Concerns over hostility against Banser and Ansor resulted in the cancellation of the groups’ mass gathering of around 100,000 people in Yogyakarta on Friday.

Ansor secretary-general Abdul Rochman cited security reasons for the cancellation, saying that the group was concerned about unwanted brawls breaking out if the gathering went forward.

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