

Foreign Ministry summons Saudi Arabian ambassador over controversial tweet

Dian Septiari

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Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto appears at the 212 rally on Jl. MH Thamrin on Sunday. (tim media prabowo sandi official/ tim media prabowo sandi official) (Courtesy of Prabowo-Sandiaga Media Team/-)

The Foreign Ministry expressed concern over a statement made by Saudi Arabian Ambassador Usamah Muhammad al-Syuaiby on Twitter regarding an Islamist rally over the weekend, and on Monday summoned representatives from the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Jakarta.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Arrmanatha Nasir said on Tuesday that the ministry had taken swift action regarding the ambassador's online statement.

"After learning about the statement by the Saudi Arabian ambassador on social media, the Foreign Ministry communicated on Sunday with the ambassador, who's still abroad," Arrmanatha said on Tuesday.

After learning that Al-Syuaiby was not available, the ministry moved on to request the presence of the deputy chief of mission or the charge d'affaires of the embassy.

Arrmanatha said the Indonesian government had deemed the ambassador's statement on social media as inappropriate. "Ethically, such a statement, as made by the ambassador on social media, is not consistent with the principles of [good] diplomatic relations," he said.

Al-Syuaiby posted a number of photos onto his Twitter account, *@Os_alshuaibi*, on Sunday with a caption in Arabic that read: "the actions of millions of Muslims as a reaction to the burning of a flag bearing the *tawhid* by a deviant organization." The tweet referred to an incident in October in which members of the civilian security unit under the Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) Ansor youth wing (Banser), burned a flag bearing Islamic text.

The NU's leadership issued on Monday a statement calling on Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to expel the Saudi Arabian ambassador.

"[We] urge the Indonesian government to send a diplomatic note to the Saudi Arabian government to recall the ambassador, as punishment for his reckless move of involving himself in a matter of national politics," NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj said in a press briefing on Monday.

Responding to the backlash, Al-Syuaiby deleted his post on Monday afternoon.

In his statement, Said Aqil also accused the ambassador of intentionally making a libelous statement by alleging that the burning of the flag was conducted by members of "*jamaah al-muharifah*" (a deviant organization). The NU chairman said those who took part in the flag burning incident were "rogue members" of the organization that had been duly punished. "We have also expressed regret over the burning of the flag."

Said Aqil further lambasted Al-Syuaibi, whom he accused of committing a "serious diplomatic violation" by getting involved in internal Indonesian affairs, in violation of his authority. "This clearly undermines Indonesia-Saudi Arabia relations," he said.

This is not the first time Al-Syuaibi has weighed in on Indonesian politics.

In early November, he made a statement in which he defended the move of firebrand cleric and Islam Defenders Front (FPI) leader Rizieq Shihab, who was questioned by authorities in Mecca for flying a black Islamic flag.

Al-Syuaiby said the *tawhid* had a significant meaning for Muslims, but displaying it on a flag was not necessarily a criminal act. "Are you a criminal for installing the flag on your house? I don't think so," he said.

In responding to the ambassador's statement, the Indonesian government appears to have walked a fine line between responding to a demand from the NU, the country's largest Islamic organization, and maintaining good ties with Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, which allocates quotas for the number of haj pilgrims allowed to enter the country.

The Saudi Arabian government was accused in 2016 of blocking access for Iranians to go on the haj following a diplomatic rift between the two nations. The Saudi Arabian government severed its diplomatic ties with Iran after a mob stormed and looted the kingdom's embassy in Tehran, retaliating for the execution of a prominent Shiite cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Among other counter-measures, the kingdom banned Iranian airlines from entering its airspace, and with no Saudi Arabian diplomatic missions in Iran, pilgrims did not have access to visas for traveling to the holy sites.

Hamdan Basyar, an expert on the Middle East from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) said Al-Syuaiby had gone too far by getting involved in Indonesia's domestic affairs. "He even mentioned the word 'deviant', which means he already made a judgmental statement. I can totally understand why the NU protested," Hamdan told *The Jakarta Post* on Tuesday.

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/12/04/foreign-ministry-summons-saudi-arabian-ambassador-over-controversial-tweet.html>