

Christian Governor Goes Down Hard Over Blasphemy Charges

As the panel of five judges delivered the verdict condemning Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama to two years in prison for blasphemy on Tuesday, they cited firebrand Islamist Habib Rizieq as a Koranic authority.

Imprisoned twice for inciting violence, the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) had until recently occupied the fringe of Indonesian society, his followers regarded as thuggish vigilantes with a penchant for extremism and extortion.

His recognition by the court as a venerable Islamic theologian—and the court's verdict itself—highlights the rising influence of Islamist groups in Indonesia. It is the world's largest Muslim-majority country but one with a multi-religious constitution and a tradition of tolerance.

The verdict, say critics, has also given a quasi-legal endorsement to a rigid interpretation of the Koran that could encourage the marginalization of Indonesia's religious minorities.

However, President Joko Widodo—a moderate reformer and an ally of Purnama—has publicly played down concerns about rising Islamic intolerance in Indonesia. After Tuesday's sentencing, he urged Indonesians to respect the legal process, noting that Purnama will appeal.

As he geared for an election to win another term as governor of the Indonesian capital last year, Purnama told a group of fisherfolk that his rivals were deceiving people by using a verse in the Koran to say that Muslims should not be led by a non-Muslim.

That comment triggered mass demonstrations, which were spearheaded by the FPI, and the blasphemy case against the ethnic Chinese and Christian governor.

Rizieq was mentioned among several witnesses as the judges dissected the contentious verse in the Koranic chapter known as Al Maidah. The court endorsed his interpretation that it forbids Muslims voting for non-Muslims. Purnama had “deliberately” and “convincingly” blasphemed, the judges found.

“Rizieq is not qualified as an expert,” said Todung Mulya Lubis, a leading Indonesian lawyer and rights advocate. “I was so shocked listening to that.”

Shocking, too, said Lubis, was the verdict itself.

Rizieq had been a prosecution witness, but the prosecutors had asked only for a suspended sentence on the lesser charge of insulting language. In the end, the judges went for a jail term under the more serious charge of blasphemy.

“The judges did not really take into account what was submitted from the defense team,” said Lubis, noting many senior clerics had sided with Purnama.

While Purnama repeatedly apologized for any hurt caused to Muslims, one judge, Abdul Rosyad, said the sentence was warranted because “the defendant didn’t feel guilt.”

Purnama was immediately taken to a detention facility in Jakarta after the sentencing. He had been due to hand over the governor’s post in October.

Purnama, known by his nickname Ahok, was widely admired as governor of Jakarta for his no-nonsense style and programs to fix the Indonesian capital’s traffic-clogged and flood-prone streets.

He had held a double-digit in opinion polls over his electoral

rivals until an edited video of his comments on the Koranic verse was distributed by Islamist groups last September. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims then joined rallies to demand his imprisonment. On April 19, he was defeated by a Muslim candidate in a run-off vote for the governorship.

Tim Lindsey, a University of Melbourne expert on Indonesia's legal system, said it was not unprecedented for Indonesian judges to take a harder line than prosecutors.

Even so, Lindsey said, conservative clerics had clearly influenced the panel of judges.

"This is the complete victory for the hardliners."

Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch said the case would consolidate a literalist interpretation of Al Maidah that demands Muslims be led by other Muslims in all facets of life.

"This will spread to the workplace. They will be demanding Islamic CEOs and senior civil servants. Islamists are already talking about it."

While President Widodo displays outward calm, several government sources have told Reuters he believes the rising influence of Islamism has been fueled by political adversaries and is distracting him from reforms.

On Monday, Widodo's government announced a ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir, a non-violent group that advocates an Islamic caliphate and was an organizer of the anti-Purnama rallies.

Police, meanwhile, have arrested leaders of Islamic groups for treason. Rizieq is also under investigation for distributing pornography and blaspheming Christianity. {eo}

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