

Indonesia bans Hizbut group that seeks global caliphate

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Jakarta: The Indonesian government today banned Hizbut Tahrir, an organization that wants to establish a global caliphate, under a new presidential decree criticized as draconian by rights groups.

Photo: AP. Members of Hizbut Tahrir hold posters during a rally in Jakarta- File Pic

Hizbut's legal status had been revoked to protect national unity, said Freddy Haris, a director-general at the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights.

The decree signed last week by President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo gives the government almost unfettered power to ban organizations deemed against the constitution and the official state ideology known as Pancasila, which enshrines democracy and social justice. Rights groups say the decree undermines the right to freedom of association and governments could easily abuse its power. But mainstream Muslim groups have supported it.

Haris said Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia listed Pancasila as an ideology of the organization in its articles of association but in fact on the ground their activities were against Pancasila and the soul of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

The measures follow months of sectarian tensions in the world's most populous Muslim nation that shook the government and undermined Indonesia's reputation for practicing a moderate form of Islam.

Hizbut Tahrir, along with groups such as the violent Islamic Defenders Front, was behind a series of massive protests against the Jakarta governor, a minority Christian and Jokowi ally who was accused of blaspheming Islam. He subsequently lost a bid for re-election to a Muslim candidate and was imprisoned for two years for blasphemy despite prosecutors downgrading the charge to a lesser offense.

Hizbut, already banned or circumscribed in some countries, is estimated to have tens of thousands of members in Indonesia.

About 2,000 people from Islamic groups protested against the decree in Jakarta on Tuesday, denouncing the government as repressive and tyrannical, and another protest is planned for Wednesday.

Jokowi's top security minister announced in May that the government planned to ban Hizbut but facing the prospect of a lengthy legal battle, Jokowi opted to sidestep courts with the controversial decree.

Separately, Rizieq Shihab, the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front, which gained a national platform for its hard-line views during the Jakarta protests, has fled Indonesia during a police investigation into alleged violations of Indonesia's anti-pornography law, which his supporters say are trumped up charges.

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