

Joko Widodo, Indonesian president, blames 'political actors' for stoking Jakarta blasphemy protests

Sunday 4 December 2016, by [HOLMES Oliver](#), [Reuters](#) (Date first published: 5 November 2016).

Joko Widodo calls for calm after big demonstration against Christian governor of Jakarta accused of insulting Qur'an.

Indonesian president Joko Widodo lashed out at politicians for stoking a huge protest that briefly turned violent on Friday night as a hardcore group pressed for the resignation of Jakarta's governor, a Christian accused of insulting the Qur'an.

The first ethnic Chinese politician to lead this sprawling city of 10 million people, Basuki Tjahja Purnama is standing for re-election in February, competing with two Muslim candidates for the job.

The governorship of the capital is a powerful position and was a stepping stone for Joko Widodo to the presidency two years ago.

At a news conference in the early hours of Saturday, Widodo called for calm and took a swipe at politicians - whom he didn't name - for whipping up demonstrators after most had already gone home.

"We deplore the incident after the Isha prayers, when should have already disbanded but became violent. And, we see this was steered by political actors who were exploiting the situation," Widodo said.

During the protest police fired tear gas and water cannon to subdue the crowd that authorities said swelled to about 150,000 after Friday prayers as they congregated around the presidential palace.

Some protesters threw rocks at the police, two vehicles were torched and a fire broke out near the city's national monument, but by the evening the demonstration was fizzling out.

However, in a northern neighbourhood of the city there was a late-night clash between police and a few dozen protesters, and social media reports showed a convenience store being looted.

Hundreds camped out until around four in the morning beside the parliament building, demanding Purnama be charged with blasphemy.

A police spokesman said one person died and 12 were hurt. Local media said about 23 people were arrested, most of them in the north, where overnight police guarded shopping and residential areas that are home to predominantly non-Muslims.

About a dozen Muslim groups have accused Purnama of insulting Islam after he said his opponents had used a verse from the Qur'an to deceive voters. The verse implies that Muslims should not

choose non-Muslims as leaders.

Chanting "God is greatest", many in Friday's protest waved placards calling for Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, to be jailed for blasphemy. A white banner hung at an overpass was painted with red letters that read "Hang Ahok here".

Police are investigating the case against Purnama, who has apologised for his remarks, insisting he was not criticising the Qur'anic verse but those who used it to attack him.

Purnama has a reputation as a no-nonsense reformer with little patience for the corruption widely blamed for the chaos and dilapidated infrastructure in an overcrowded city.

He remains popular despite efforts by Muslim groups to vilify him and is seen as the frontrunner in the election, though many voters are angry with him for evicting large numbers from slums to modernise Jakarta.

Widodo, a Muslim, has vowed not to interfere in any legal proceedings against Purnama, according to media reports. But he said at his news conference that any legal process involving Purnama would be executed "swiftly, firmly and transparently".

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country, but protests on such a large scale are rare. Ethnic Chinese make up just over one per cent of the country's 250 million people, and they typically do not enter politics.

Indonesian Chinese have faced persecution and violence in the past, especially during the political and social turmoil that gripped Jakarta when former president Suharto was toppled.

On Saturday Widodo cancelled a planned three-day visit to Australia, citing the security situation in Jakarta.

Reuters

* The Guardian. Saturday 5 November 2016 04.00 GM:

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/05/indonesian-president-blames-political-actors-for-stoking-jakarta-blasphemy-protests>

Fears over violence in Jakarta as hardline Islamists protest governor's 'blasphemy'

18,000 police deployed as thousands expected for demonstration against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or 'Ahok', who they accuse of 'insulting Islam'.

Security forces in the Indonesian capital Jakarta are on high alert in preparation for a Friday rally by hardline Islamist groups against the city's non-Muslim governor.

Thousands of people are due to move into the capital to protest against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese and Christian nicknamed 'Ahok', who has governed the city since 2014.

They accuse him of blasphemy after he criticised his opponents for referencing a verse in the Koran that warns against allying with Christians and Jews.

In September, Ahok suggested those who used the passage against him were “lying”, leading to outrage from some hardliners who interpreted his comments as criticism of the Islamic holy text. He later apologised.

President Joko Widodo said on Monday that he had ordered the “state apparatus to be on alert” during the protests.

The main group behind the rally, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) which formed in 1999, is known for violent demonstrations and attacks on minorities.

The group tried unsuccessfully in 2014 to block Ahok from becoming governor on the grounds that a Christian should not lead a Muslim-majority city. And later that year, a protest by the FPI turned violent leaving several police officer injured.

On Friday, demonstrators will attend prayers at Istiqlal Mosque and then march to the presidential palace, where armoured personnel carriers have been stationed and the police and military will be deployed.

“I appeal to everyone to stay calm. Do not be easily provoked by the social media,” said National Police Chief General Tito, adding that 18,000 personnel have been deployed. The Indonesian military will provide a further 500 troops.

The rally is the second large demonstration against Ahok in a month. On 14 October, thousands took part in a generally peaceful event outside city hall.

As the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesians largely practice a moderate form of Islam. While the FPI is a relatively small group, the country’s largest Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, has told its 40 million members not to support the protests.

But equally, Indonesia’s Ulama Council, the country’s top Muslim clerical body, agreed that Ahok had committed blasphemy and should be prosecuted. It said a non-Muslim should not become a leader of Muslims.

The southeast Asian nation has a history of sporadic and isolated violence against Christian as well as its large ethnic Chinese minority, many of whom are Buddhists.

International militant jihadists, some with influence and members in Indonesia, are looking to capitalise on the anti-Ahok sentiment.

Last month, al Qaida’s branch in Syria, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, said that Indonesia should sentence Ahok or it would “sentence him with bullets’. And ISIS supporters have sent messages to their supporters asking them to use the rally ‘to fan the flames of jihad’.

“It’s clear that everyone is worried about violence, and huge numbers of police and soldiers have been called up for duty,” said Sidney Jones, the director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict.

The governor is looking toward a February election and looks likely to win. He is politically close with president Widodo, who also served as Jakarta governor for 18 months before rising to the country’s highest office and handing over to Ahok.

But Jones said that supporters of Anies Baswedan, a former minister of education who is second behind Ahok in the gubernatorial race, are exploiting the potentially explosive upheaval to damage him politically.

“The problem is that there are too many interests involved here: Ahok’s rivals would like to decrease his likelihood of winning; hardline civil society groups want to show that they control the streets; pro-shariah groups want to show massive support for Islamic law; the tiny jihadi groups are urging their members to show their courage by attacking police.”

Oliver Holmes, Southeast Asia correspondent

* The Guardian. Wednesday 2 November 2016 04.11 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/02/fears-over-violence-in-jakarta-as-hardline-islamists-protest-governors-blasphemy>
