

Indonesian government bans Hizbut Tahrir

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Indonesian President Joko Widodo has banned the Islamist organisation Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), using his presidential power to issue a regulation in lieu of law, known as *Perppu*.

The presidential edict issue on July 19 allows the arbitrary side-stepping of the 2013 law on associations, which provides for the banning of organisations but sets out procedures and leaves the final decision to a court. The change gives state officials the power to summarily remove the legal status of organisations. The regulation will be presented to the national parliament in six months but takes immediate effect.

The coordinating minister for political, legal and security affairs, Wiranto, a former Suharto-era army general and close political ally of Widodo, announced the regulation on July 12. He said it allowed the government to remove the permit of any organisation allegedly opposed to state ideology of Pancasila and the country's 1945 constitution.

Foreshadowing a wide crackdown on political dissent, Wiranto said there were numbers of organisations existing that were a threat to Indonesia. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is one immediately in the government's crosshairs. Wiranto added disingenuously that the new procedure "is merely aimed at maintaining national unity and safeguarding the nation's existence. It is not an arbitrary act of government."

Hizbut Tahrir is an Islamist movement founded in 1953 in Jerusalem. It has operated in Indonesia since at least the 1980s.

It played a role in the Islamist campaign directed against the Widodo government during the recent Jakarta gubernatorial election. Widodo's supporter and protégé Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was ousted from his post as governor and jailed in May on frame-up "blasphemy" charges concocted originally by a number of right-wing Islamist groups.

HTI is based on a reactionary Pan-Islamist ideology that advocates a universal Muslim caliphate, an Islamic government and the imposition of Sharia law.

The organisation has not, however, been formally accused of or prosecuted for any criminal act. HTI is an easy target as it is banned in a number of European countries and by most Middle Eastern regimes. It is also opposed by Indonesia's established Muslim parties and its banning has been endorsed by the country's largest, Nahdlatul Ulama.

Any organisation deemed to be based on "Marxist-Leninism" is already prohibited, reflecting the fears of the entire ruling class of the emergence of a movement of the working class and rural poor. Working people were the real targets of the 1965 US-backed coup that toppled President Sukarno, installed the Suharto dictatorship regime and left at least 500,000 dead.

Last month Widodo ordered his ministers to pressure the parliament's lower house, the DPR, to restore a role for the country's armed forces (TNI) in internal security and counter-terrorist measures. The DPR is revising the Eradication of Terrorism law.

Following the fall of the Suharto dictatorship, the National Police were removed from army control and given exclusive responsibility for domestic security. The TNI, notorious for murderous repression throughout the Suharto regime, were forced to step back, at least formally, from internal security operations.

The anti-democratic measures now being implemented by the Widodo administration reflect deep rifts and infighting in the country's ruling elite in the lead up to the presidential and parliamentary elections due in 2019.

These divisions were exposed during the bitter conflict involved in the Jakarta election. Government opponents were able to mobilise hundreds of thousands to two anti-Basuki rallies in Jakarta in November and

December. Arrests followed and twice this year Widodo has told the media he would “clobber” those who threatened national political stability, a term used by Suharto.

The Islamist groups allied with Widodo’s political enemies cynically exploited resentment over glaring social inequality and the association of both Basuki and Widodo with economic development that for decades has only benefited the rich.

The latest World Bank figures updated in April show 40 percent of the population is vulnerable to falling into poverty, while over 10 percent live below the Indonesian government’s official poverty line of \$US27 per month or 82 cents per day. One percent of the 250 million Indonesians own half of all national financial assets.

Widodo’s opponents include sections of the country’s political and financial elite, particularly associated with the Suharto regime and its corrupt system of patronage and economic protectionism. These layers deeply resent Widodo’s pro-market “reforms” that threaten their interests.

Widodo’s coalition represents sections of the ruling class, which were also spawned in the Suharto period, but are more oriented to foreign investors, seek to further open up the Indonesian economy and are critical of protectionist measures.

Suharto-era general Prabowo Subianto, Widodo’s opponent at the 2014 presidential election, has positioned himself as the leader of the government’s opponents. His candidate, Anies Baswedan, won the Jakarta governorship.

Prabowo and Anies embraced the reactionary chauvinist campaign of the Islamic groups which included the FPI and the GNPf-MUI along with the HTI. They attacked Basuki, who is a Christian with a Chinese heritage, as unfit to rule over Muslims in a majority Muslim country.

The motives of the Islamist groups in exploiting the religious sentiments of the most oppressed layers have a class content. GNPf-MUI leader Bachtiar Nasir gave Reuters an interview in May in which he made clear the next target of his organisation would be ethnic Chinese and stopping the inflow of Chinese capital to Indonesia. He called for an affirmative action program for non-Chinese Indonesians.

The Islamist groups represent a layer of the ruling

elite that was excluded from the largesse of the Suharto regime and now want to enhance their position at the expense of Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese minority. This meets up with the interests of those supporting Prabowo who resent ethnic Chinese, who while making up only five percent of the population, are strongly represented among business and financial interests.

The fear in ruling circles is that this infighting will open the way for a broader movement of workers and the rural poor that will threaten the interest of the capitalist class as a whole. That is what is driving the shedding of the democratic veneer of the post-Suharto period and the adoption of anti-democratic measures.



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