Mass rally to promote moderate Islam in Indonesia canceled

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JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Organizers of an Indonesian movement to promote a moderate brand of Islam have canceled a mass rally after its youth supporters burned the flag of an outlawed hard-line Muslim group, sparking allegations of blasphemy.

The rally in Yogyakarta, predicted to draw 100,000 people, was canceled to prevent violence, said Yahya Cholil Staquf, general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization.

Video of members of Nahdlatul Ulama's youth arm burning the flag of the outlawed group, Hizbut Tahrir, has stirred controversy in Indonesia because the flag is also emblazoned with the Islamic declaration of faith. Their uniforms indicated they're part of the youth organization's militia.

At least 1,000 people protested the flag burning in Jakarta and Bandung on Friday, demanding prosecution of those responsible.

Demonstrators in white Islamic robes snarled traffic outside the security ministry in Jakarta, waving flags with Arabic text professing belief in one God and chanting "God is great" and "No God except Allah."

Staquf said Hizbut Tahrir "operatives" disrupted the youth wing's celebrations and exploited religious symbols, which led to the flag burning incident.

He said the campaign of "provocation and sabotage" was widely believed to be directed by political forces hoping to influence the outcome of Indonesia's presidential election in April.

Some 70,000 members of Ansor, Nahdlatul Ulama's youth arm, had been on their way to Yogyakarta for the rally to coincide with the launch of an inter-faith movement that aims to counter extremism globally.

"Further incidents of provocation were planned. Our members would find it difficult to control their anger in the face of such flagrant exploitation of our religious symbols," said Staquf.

The image of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, as being religiously moderate was undermined last year when the minority Christian governor of the capital, Jakarta, was imprisoned for blasphemy following street protests against him that drew hundreds of thousands.

Hizbut Tahrir, which seeks a global caliphate, was banned by the Indonesian government last year.

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