

Indonesia's "Moral Revolution"

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Indonesia's next presidential election is three years away, but several prominent figures have been positioning themselves as possible contenders. Include in that group a man who has made a name for himself as a thorn in the side of the current leader, and a man quite willing to incite public disorder to make his political points

He is Rizieq Shihab, muslim cleric and "Grand Imam" of the "Islamic Defenders Front", the FPI.

Back in Indonesia following three years of self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia, he has a new campaign – "*Ayo Revolusi Akhlaq*" (Lets Have a Moral Revolution) , and also has his sights on the country's top job.



*Rizieq Shihab, now facing court action over Covid health protocol violations / photo
Facebook*

Rizieq has used the FPI for decades as a vigilante movement, targeting Indonesia's secular democracy, and criticizing the country's increasing liberalism.

The group was instrumental in the controversial ousting of Jakarta governor Basuki Purnama in 2017 - accused of blasphemy and eventually jailed.

Now, the group's been banned, as the estimated hundreds of thousands of members were beginning to come together to oppose the current administration.

Rizieq turned himself into Police after holding events that breached coronavirus crowd restrictions - he was arrested and now faces prosecution.

But while he may be embroiled in court action, and his supporters left in limbo , the underlying battle for high moral ground in Indonesian politics continues.

Before Rizieq's return, the FPI Central Leadership Council issued a release stating that he would lead a revolution to "save" the country.

EXPERT

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The action has been dubbed “*revolusi akhlak*” (the moral revolution) , and already has huge interest from Rizieq’s supporters across the country

The term “*revolusi*” or Arabic word “*thawrat*” are powerful ones, often used to call for fundamental change which might involve a change of direction.

The Arabic word “*Akhlak*” or “*akhlāq*” is also an important concept in Islam regarding ethics, moral, character, behaviour, and disposition, usually used to stress the core of revolution.

Returning to Indonesia during the month of *maulid* (the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday), carrying the title of *habib* (the descendant of Prophet Muhammad) and introducing “*revolusi akhlak*” was a very clever strategy by Rizieq.

One loyal supporter, Fahim, told me “Our Imam Besar [Grand Imam] is back with a noble agenda of moral revolution for this country that has no morals”.

Rizieq’s claim to be the top cleric in the country stands alongside his claim to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad, both give him a degree of public credibility and respect, despite being rejected by other Islamic leaders.

His public events - part-sermon, part-political rally - have been focused on Indonesia’s descent into immorality under Joko Widodo, and a call for Shariah law to be introduced nationwide.

He compares his “moral revolution” to Jokowi’s “mental revolution”

“Why don’t I use mental revolution.? he says. “The word mental is used by Karl Marx ... the king of the communists”. Linking the current Indonesian President to communism is a common strategy for his political opponents.

Jokowi used the phrase “mental revolution” during the 2014 presidential election, and it was formalised under a Presidential Instruction in 2016 dubbed “[Gerakan Nasional Revolusi Mental](#)” (Mental Revolution National Movement).

Jokowi was actually calling on Indonesians to break free from apathy and believe in themselves and their country, a call that struck a chord with many voters.

His comments echoed those of Indonesia’s first President, Sukarno, who also initiated the idea of a mental revolution.

In the 1960’s Sukarno told Indonesians : “*Berdiri di atas kaki sendiri*”(stand on your own two feet).



Sukarno , Indonesian President from 1945-1967 / photo Indo archive

Jokowi’s opponents, including Rizieq, claim the President isn’t matching the words with action, and

the new moral revolution must sweep away the Marxist-influenced mental version.

Rizieq's strategy to combine the religious concept of *akhlak* with his political agenda aligns with an oft-mentioned feature of Islam and political discourse, emphasising the interdependency between Islam, politics, and ethics.

His relentless criticism of Jokowi mirrors the ethics in Islamic political works addressing the performance of leaders and their government officials.

A genre in Islamic literature called "*adab al-mulūk*" (the manners of the rulers) focuses on the *akhlak* of rulers, the statecraft, and ethical behaviour in general.

Rizieq's moral revolution does not refer specifically to any of the rich discussions within Islamic tradition. His speech during the recent virtual reunion of the [hardline 212 group](#) was titled "*Revolusi Akhlak: Solusi untuk Indonesia yang Bermartabat*" (Moral Revolution: Solutions for a Dignified Indonesia), and focussed on emphasising the links between Indonesia's [Pancasila](#) ideology, and the spirit of *akhlak* taught by the Prophet Muhammad.

Those opposing Rizieq believe that his moral revolution is a far cry from a call to transform supporters to develop good and praiseworthy character (*husn al-khulq* and *al-akhlāq al-mahmūdah*).

Rizieq has highlighted that the *revolusi akhlak* should be carried out at the individual and system levels.

At the system level, he invited followers to leave the materialism-secularism-based system for a system based on *tawhīd* (the oneness of God) as, according to him, it aligns with the first principle of Pancasila.

At the individual level, the call is to become a more conservative, more moral Muslim.



FPI members confront Police in Jakarta / photo AP

However, Rizieq's *revolusi akhlak* suffers from massive contradictions – criticising the government while at the same time advocating Pancasila is not the least of them.

He threatens people's lives in many of his remarks, including letting thousands of people gather amid the country's battle against COVID-19. He has also called for the beheadings of Police who refuse to act swiftly against those who insult the Prophet.

His critics also find themselves in the firing line, with Indonesian celebrity Nikita Mirzani, was publicly called a "lonte" (crude Indonesian slang for prostitute) by Rizieq during the sacred commemoration of the Prophet's birthday.

Rizieq repeated the word eight times, garnering significant criticism from many Muslims, who questioned whether it is possible to conduct a moral revolution when your own morals may be

questionable.

While Indonesia struggles with its nationwide Covid response, and a death toll sitting at around 35,000, the idea of a moral revolution rolls out in a country where personal responsibility and being a “good muslim” remain strong tenants of society. Whether Rizieq can sort out his legal issues and re-constitute an acceptable alternative to the FPI remains to be seen.

In a statement, FPI spokesman Novel Bamukmin said members would not be deterred by the dissolution of the organisation. “They can disband the FPI but they cannot disband our struggle in defending the country and religion,” he said. “We can declare a new Islamic mass organisation this afternoon if we like. Registered or not, we continue to exist.”

Rizieq’s political allies and militant supporters are optimistic about his future political fortunes. For many Indonesians, however, this *revolusi akhlak* “without the akhlak” is a concerning illusion of smoke and mirrors - a strategy which simultaneously disguises and facilitates Rizieq and his allies’ campaign to fulfil their political agenda.

- Asia Media Centre