

Indonesian president expels Islamist party from coalition

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JAKARTA, April 4 — Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has expelled the Islamist PKS party from the ruling coalition after it opposed an increase in fuel prices, in a move aimed at boosting his authority in parliament.

The decision was announced overnight by a member of Yudhoyono's Democrat Party and followed a decision by PKS to join parliamentary opponents of a government plan for a 33 percent rise in fuel prices.

Anti-riot police block student protesters outside the parliament building in Jakarta during a demonstration against fuel hikes on March 29, 2012. — Reuters pic
Parliament voted on Saturday to raise fuel prices under certain conditions despite worry that could boost inflation and trigger protests in Southeast Asia's largest economy.
Yudhoyono must step down in 2014 after serving two terms and is struggling to assert his authority over parliament ahead of an election seen as pivotal for a country that recently regained investment grade status from two ratings agencies.

"It has ended," said Syarief Hasan from the coalition's secretariat following a meeting of party leaders. He was referring to a coalition partnership that included the PKS, which he said had violated an alliance contract.

"At the moment there are only five members of the coalition that are together and solid with the government," Hasan said.

The chairman of the PKS, or Prosperous Justice Party, did not attend the meeting and the party was not immediately available for comment. But its departure from the coalition was expected to have little direct impact on economic policy.

Coalition parties support the government in parliament under a contract signed with the president but both PKS and Golkar, a former ruling party and one of the main members of the coalition, regularly oppose the president's policies.

Indonesia is a secular state with the world's largest population of Muslims and significant religious minorities including Christians and Hindus.

Islamist parties in Indonesia support parliamentary democracy and take conservative positions on social issues.

"If PKS is out, then support for the government in parliament will be reduced although it will still be above 50 per cent. However it would give a louder voice for the opposition to try to scuttle non-popular policies," said Dodi Ambardi, a political analyst from Indonesia's Survey Institute.

PKS has three members in the cabinet: the agriculture minister, information and communication minister and social welfare minister.

Hasan did not say whether those ministers would be replaced, though analysts said the posts were likely to be given to main coalition members the Democrat Party and Golkar. — Reuters

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