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Banning Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia: Freedom or Security?

By Alexander R. Arifianto

Synopsis

The Indonesian government has issued a recommendation for the Islamist group Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) to be legally prohibited. While some observers have criticised the proposal on grounds of freedom of expression or assembly, the move may be justifiable for Indonesian security.

Commentary

ON 8 MAY 2017, retired general Wiranto, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, issued a statement stating that after a careful study, the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) administration will start legal proceedings to declare Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) a prohibited organisation throughout the country.

He stated that his rationale to ban the organisation is because HTI's ideology which promotes a global Islamic caliphate is contradictory to Indonesia's national ideology Pancasila. Thus, it has violated Law No. 17/2013 on Civil Society Organisations (CSO), which authorised the government to prohibit any organisations which "propagates any ideological or philosophical teachings which violates Pancasila and Indonesia's 1945 Constitution".

Payback or Crackdown?

Some critics have accused the Jokowi administration's action as retaliation against HTI for its active role in the movement directed against former Jakarta Governor's Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) that ended his re-election bid last month. However, Wiranto strongly denied this accusation.

The Indonesian government, he said, would begin the legal proceedings to ban HTI, which requires the government to file a motion in a district court to revoke HTI's permit to operate as a CSO in Indonesia. If granted, the organisation has the right to appeal the court's ruling in an Appellate Court, and finally in the Indonesian Supreme Court.

HTI has received legal recognition in Indonesia since 2000, after operating underground for more than two decades during the Suharto regime. An affiliate of the global *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation) movement, it was first introduced in Indonesia around 1980 by a West Java-based cleric named Abdullah bin Nuh and an Australia-based preacher named Abdurrahman al-Baghdadi.

They founded a campus preaching (*da'wa*) centre at Bogor Institute of Agricultural Studies (IPB) that became the cornerstone for Hizb ut-Tahrir's activities in Indonesia. Over the next two decades the movement managed to gain membership at state university campuses as well as in professional associations.

HTI's Influence in Indonesian Society

HTI maintains its strong presence at Indonesian state universities during the post-*Reformasi* period. Unofficial estimates put its membership to be at least one million followers. It is especially strong at state universities which specialise in training public school teachers – the so-called teacher's training and educational universities (IKIP). It is strong in these universities because it seeks newly minted public high school teachers as potential recruits.

After being inducted as its cadres, these teachers could assist in spreading HTI's ideology to promote a global caliphate among their junior and senior public high school teachers throughout Indonesia. Serving as *rohis* (short for *rohani Islam* or high school propagation teachers), these teachers are able to control the *rohis* classes' curriculum and to pass on HTI's ideology among their high school pupils.

Recent surveys done by a number of research institutes have confirmed HTI's influence among public high school teachers and their pupils. A survey released in January 2017 conducted by the Institute for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University finds 78 percent of surveyed Indonesian Islamic religious teachers in public schools support the implementation of Islamic (*shari'a*) law in Indonesia, while 77 percent supports conservative Islamist organisations which are advocating for this goal.

A 2016 survey by Maarif Institute – a think-tank affiliated with Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Muslim organisation - shows more than half of public high school students in West Java province are supportive towards the establishment of a caliphate-based state.

Freedom of Expression vs Security Consideration

There are other aspects of HTI strategies that have attracted attention. Its *nusrah* (seeking allies) strategy aims to invite national and local civil servants, politicians,

and security apparatus to HTI events, to turn them to become potential sympathisers, if not cadres.

HTI provincial board members from East Java province have revealed in an interview with the author that it has engaged in extensive dialogues with a number of local politicians, including the province's deputy governor who is widely anticipated to seek the gubernatorial position during the 2018 regional election, to "educate" them regarding HTI and its ideology. They also claim HTI currently has several dozen mid-level officers of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) who have been inducted to become its cadres.

A number of observers have criticised the Indonesian government's proposed ban against HTI by stating that Law No. 17/2013, which forms the legal foundation of the government's case against the organisation, is legally vague. If interpreted broadly, it can open a pathway for potential abuse of power by the Jokowi administration to silence its critics, including but not limited to, hard-line Islamic groups.

While these criticisms do have merit, the above evidences show that by expanding into public high schools and universities and recruiting politicians, civil servants, and TNI officers as potential sympathisers, HTI may endanger Indonesia's domestic security, with implications for regional security as well.

At a time when the possibility of regional extremism is at an all-time high, the Indonesian government has placed a premium on security considerations over an organisation's right to freely express itself, especially when such expressions are in clear contradiction of Indonesia's national ideology.

However, even if it was successfully enacted, the proposed ban against HTI would not stop its *da'wa* campaign in Indonesia. Hizb ut-Tahrir branches elsewhere have proven themselves to be very effective when they are being forced to operate underground. How the Jokowi administration would enforce the prohibition once it is enacted remains an open question.

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