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TNI's Role in Counterterrorism: Impact On Military Reform

By Chaula Anindya

Synopsis

Lawmakers in Indonesia are currently revising an existing anti-terrorism law. The proposed legislation will give TNI, the Indonesian armed forces, a more direct role in combatting terrorism. This may pose a hurdle to continued military reform.

Commentary

INDONESIAN LAWMAKERS are currently deliberating revisions to an existing anti-terrorism law which appears insufficient in facing the threat of Islamic State (IS). One of the main points debated in the terrorism bill is the role of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) in counterterrorism.

According to existing law, the TNI is only allowed to assist counterterrorism operations under the command of the Indonesian National Police (POLRI). The new bill allows for certain conditions under which the TNI may assume a more active role, rather than serving only as an Auxiliary Support Force (BOK).

Generals Back More Authority

The process of revising the anti-terrorism law has been underway for more than a year and the final draft is expected to be ready for a vote at year's end. One of the points that has prolonged the discussion is the role of the TNI in counterterrorism. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo began advocating a more active role for TNI after a twin suicide bombing struck a bus terminal in Kampung Melayu, East Jakarta in May 2017. The attack killed three police officers.

A number of current and former military generals, many of whom serve in important

posts in the government, have emphasised the importance of the TNI's role in counterterrorism. The TNI commander, Gen. Gatot Nurmantyo, has argued forcefully that terrorism must not be treated as a crime but as a threat to state security. He asserted the impending danger of a "proxy war" where subversive foreign agents will infiltrate Indonesia in a variety of ways, including exploiting the threat of terrorism.

Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu, a retired general, has further asserted that combatting terrorism should not be the exclusive purview of just one agency, as they will be insufficient to the task. This statement might suggest a rebuke of POLRI as they are at the forefront of counterterrorism measures in Indonesia.

TNI's Direct Role in Counterterrorism?

Another retired general, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Wiranto argued that the TNI should be given a direct role and no longer work as BOK, playing a supporting function. He believed regulations pertaining to TNI involvement in counterterrorism operations should be simplified and made less burdensome so that when the need arises, appropriate forces can be deployed quickly and effectively.

As these generals hold important positions in the defence and security sectors, their opinions about the proper role of the TNI in counterterrorism carry significant weight. However, there is also a base of public support for their ideas.

According to a survey done by Kompas, a leading daily, 93% of respondents supported the TNI having some role in counterterrorism, while 38% supported the idea of TNI autonomy in combating terrorism. More than half or 55% percent of respondents believe the TNI should remain under the command of POLRI, although the number who support autonomy is still significant.

TNI's Expanded Role: Inevitable?

A coalition of civil society groups has been strongly opposed to the TNI's expanded involvement in counterterrorism for fear of human rights abuses and the potential erosion of civilian control of the military. Yet the legislation continues to march forward, with lawmakers confident that the new bill will soon be finalised.

The House's committee chairman on the anti-terrorism bill, Muhammad Syafi'i, has ensured the public that despite this expansion of TNI authority, Indonesia is committed to the rule of law and that law enforcement will remain the responsibility of POLRI.

The revised legislation will first establish that the TNI is no longer limited to serving in a BOK or auxiliary capacity. The exact conditions under which and in what manner the TNI should be given a direct role in counterterrorism will be clarified after the bill is ratified using Peraturan Presiden (Presidential Regulation).

Jokowi will consult with the House of Representatives (DPR) on the terms before issuing the Regulation. This should grant him sufficient leeway to bypass their approval in the future should it be necessary to rapidly deploy the TNI in response to a terror attack.

Challenges Ahead

The main concern over the TNI's expanded involvement is that it will hinder the ongoing process of military reform. Efforts to reform the military in Indonesia have stressed the division of duties and responsibilities between the TNI and POLRI.

Under this arrangement, the TNI's main task has been to protect the nation from external threats while POLRI's has been maintaining internal security and order. The TNI's active role in counterterrorism could blur this dividing line and presage a return to the political culture of the New Order, when the military had an internal security role.

One potential benefit of the proposed new arrangement is that the Army (TNI AD), the most dominant service, could use its advantage in intelligence-gathering and guerrilla warfare to combat terrorism. However, this has the potential to further entrench the Army as the most dominant service and allow its territorial command structure - which many observers consider problematic – to remain untouched by reforms.

Indonesia is striving for a more balanced armed forces, and has laid out plans for key doctrines such as Minimum Essential Force (MEF) and Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) which would direct additional resources to both the Navy (TNI AL) and the Air Force (TNI AU). However, if the Army begins to play a more outsized role in monitoring and combatting terrorism, the defence budget allocation for TNI AD will likely increase at the expense of the other services.

Additionally, the territorial command structure – which mirrors the civilian structure of governance and creates opportunities for political transactions during local elections - has long been the target of military reform efforts. With an expanded role in internal security, the Army will likely be able to fend off these efforts by claiming the structure is necessary to combat terrorism.

Given all this, Indonesia must sustain its efforts toward military reform. TNI AL and TNI AU should continue receiving additional resources to raise their profiles and develop a balanced armed forces that can address threats from air, land and sea - especially considering the intensifying danger of transboundary terrorism. It is important that Indonesia remains wary of involving the TNI too much in the preservation of internal security, even in the interest of national security.

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