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Ba'asyir Release: Implications for Islamist Militancy in Indonesia

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Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, commonly touted as the emir or the spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), is scheduled to be released on 14 June 2006. Ba'asyir, 66, was first detained in October 2002 following the first Bali bombings. He was then accused of trying to overthrow the Indonesian government in order to establish an Islamic state. However, on September 2003, he was acquitted of treason and sentenced to four years imprisonment instead.

Shortly following his release in October 2004, he was re-arrested for his alleged involvement in the J.W Marriott hotel bombing in 2003 as well as for conspiracy in the 2002 Bali bombings. Ba'asyir was acquitted of the former but charged with the latter and sentenced to 30 months imprisonment in March 2005. Following his sentence, he later received a sentence reduction of four and a half months on Indonesia's Independence Day last year, causing outraged primarily among the Australians.

Ba'asyir's legal team believes their client will be released from the Cipinang prison on June 14, 2006. If things go as scheduled, his release is expected to be greeted by a large rally of supporters.

Ba'asyir and JI

The question on everyone's mind is: how will Ba'asyir's release affect the environment of Islamist militancy in Indonesia in general and JI in particular? To address this question, one has to take into account that the JI is no longer the cohesive organization it once was.

Many analysts have argued that JI is roughly split into two factions. Firstly, there is the JI mainstream, which comprises of those who believe in the long term socialization of Islam and the waging of jihad in conflict zones. JI's political faction, Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI) falls under this category. Secondly, there is the faction currently led by Indonesia's most wanted terror fugitive, Noordin Top, who has been held responsible for most of the major attacks that have taken place in Indonesia since the 2002 Bali bombings.

Field interviews indicate that Ba'asyir had some knowledge of the 2002 Bali bombings even though he may not have been directly involved in the operations. But shortly after the bombings were perpetrated, he was arrested by the Indonesian authorities and became disconnected from the group responsible for operations. The rift between him and those responsible for the bombing operations deepened as rumors abound that the late Azahari Husin and Noordin Top, who is still on the run, have broken away to form their own group.

This split was confirmed early this year when Noordin Top announced that he has formed a new group called the Tandzim Qaedatul Jihad.

As the pressure from the Indonesian authorities on Noordin Top's group and his followers mounts, MMI took on a significant shift. In the aftermath of the October 2005 Bali bombings, the organization, for the first time, condemned suicide bombings. According to Fauzan Anshori, the MMI spokesperson, "terrorist groups conducted attacks on Indonesian soil because they believed the government was merely a lackey of the US, but they 'missed' their target by killing many innocent people". This change may reflect MMI's efforts to distance itself from JI, particularly in light of the intensification of efforts by the authorities to crack down on the group. Also, the attacks, which have resulted in Muslim casualties, have received increasing vocal opposition from Indonesian Muslims.

Resurgence of Threat?

Ba'asyir's influence over the pro-bombing faction remains limited. Even prior to 2002, according to a former militant who had some contact with the spiritual leader, Ba'asyir had difficulties exerting control over the more radical and militant members of the group. As he puts it, "He (Ba'asyir) may shout at the top of his voice, but no one will really listen to him". Now that Noordin Top has splintered off, whatever influence Ba'asyir had on operations has probably diminished. To top it off, Noordin Top is no longer just recruiting from his former JI's circle but also from other Islamist groups operating in Indonesia.

This is not just about jihad, but also about power. Noordin has been said to be a very assertive leader who likes to exert control and loses his temper when his instructions are not obeyed. Although Ba'asyir is a symbolic and still highly respected figure among some jihadist circles, it is doubtful that Noordin would relinquish his control over his new recruits just to submit to Ba'asyir's leadership or guidance. Thus, Ba'asyir's release from prison may not have any significant impact on Noordin Top's operations.

Ba'asyir's release is more significant for MMI or the JI mainstream. His communication with this faction continued even when he was in prison. His supporters may be emboldened by his release and a press statement from MMI should be expected. But Ba'asyir may remain low-profile in the near future so as not to risk being arrested again. He is probably aware that the authorities will keep tabs on him and his movements. According to another former Islamist militant who has been imprisoned before, "those who have had the experience of being in prison will normally think twice of committing another criminal or terror act". Although this statement is subject to an individual's jihadist fervor, it is not possible to rule out the same happening to Ba'asyir.

It is more important to look at the long term implications of Ba'asyir's release. Will MMI preserve Ba'asyir's position as the emir of the organization or will he be given a new role? Ba'asyir's stature in the organization is highly symbolic rather than operational. In addition, having been imprisoned before, the respect for him among his followers has increased. Many believed he is the victim of conspiracy between the US and the Indonesian government. Other high level members in MMI may ride on this sympathy and preserve his prominent role in the organization. In the long term, this political movement may restructure and consolidate its strength to pose a greater threat than the pro-bombing faction. Moreover, they have the advantage of operating in the open and are protected by their legitimacy as a political movement that does not engage in violence.

As for the international implications of Ba'asyir's release, international pressure on the Indonesian government particularly from the US and the Australian governments will heighten following the release of Ba'asyir. These governments have made it clear they do not want to see Ba'asyir a free man. The Indonesian government is threading a fine line. On the one hand, the release of Ba'asyir indicates that the government does not take the threat of terrorism seriously enough and signals the weakness of its anti-terrorism legislation. However, on the other hand, the government has to take into account the sensitivities of its Muslim majority population. By increasing Ba'asyir's prison sentence, the government will be seen as bowing to US pressure. The Indonesian government is placed in a very difficult position. But for now, it seems that the feelings of their Muslim population have won the upper hand.

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