



Is Poso all about JI? The roots of the Conflict

*Evan A. Laksmana**

23 March 2007

IN THE past few months, Central Sulawesi's Poso saw an upsurge in violence. It was reported in *The Straits Times* on 3 March 2007 that the Indonesian government has finally acknowledged the role of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the violence, following a major crackdown by the police since the new year began.

Many other analyses have argued that JI plays an active role in Poso. Indeed, the Indonesian government through the anti-terror desk at the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, has supported this argument. Thus, one would eventually blame JI for all the political violence and terrorism in Poso.

This argument is based on several facts that were revealed in the aftermath of the police raids in January. First, the suspects arrested turned out to be JI members. Second, the accused have been proselytizing a deviant form of Islam that is used to justify attacks against Christians. Third, since the eruption of religious violence in 1999, Poso has become a magnet for a cross section of the Islamic extremist and terrorist movement.

These arguments certainly appear to be valid. After all, they were based on police interrogations and investigations emphasized by the confessions of several ex-JI leaders such as Nasir Abbas. The armed resistance to the police raid further underscored the presence of JI militants. This "evidence" was used to highlight the spread of indoctrination in Poso.

The proponents of this argument conclude that the current crisis in Poso is due to JI and its extremist ideology. The response then is a mix of security and counter-ideology. The same tools are being used against JI across the region. However, this begs the question, is the Poso conflict rooted with, or is being exploited by JI? There is a subtle difference between the two yet it is a critical question.

What is Poso really about?

The argument that Poso is all about JI has missed several important issues relating to the Poso conflicts in general.

The first is the chicken and egg question: which came first, the radical preachers or the radical believers? It is clear that JI has deployed its members to radicalize the population in Poso. But the residents, particularly the youth, were susceptible to radicalization through preexisting issues. The two most critical were poverty & unemployment, and the desire to avenge the deaths of their relatives during the height of the religious-communal conflict in 1999-2001. This was a critical issue for Basri, one of the "star" detainees who claimed that his involvement with JI stemmed from a desire to avenge the deaths of 26 of his relatives during the aforementioned conflict.

Secondly, does the armed resistance demonstrate a clear link with JI? Weapons, both

home-made and organic, from past conflicts (e.g. Ambon), smuggled from the Philippines, Malaysia, or those provided by corrupt security officials are widely available. The large and diverse arms cache found during the December raid appeared to be consistent with local conditions, and not supporting any claims of outside involvement. Additionally, the accused men also claimed that they were threatened by the wanted men to fight off the police or they would be harmed. This seems to rebut the argument that the community simply fought the police because they were radicalized.

Thirdly, JI is not the only actor involved in the Poso conflict, but one of many that include local and national political elites along with several “rogue” members of the military.

A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) has highlighted how local political elites fighting over revenues and position at the regional level contributed to the conflict in 1999-2001. This however was largely settled through the Malino Peace Accord in 2001. Adnan Arsal, a well-known cleric from the Tanah Runtuh area, has mentioned how national political elites are involved in Poso as he mentioned how the current security approach was based on the intentions of some circles running security businesses, including the security of a Water-based Electric Power Plant in the Sulewana area.

Another report by HRW released in mid-2006, as well by Kontras, a coalition of human rights NGOs in 2004, showed how military personnel have been engaged in business practices in and around conflict zones. In Poso, the HRW report claimed that the military charged inflated prices to hire out military trucks and supply fuel via its cooperatives and that it also charged exorbitant illegal levies along roads.

Additionally, as the report argues on, in some cases the military takes advantage of humanitarian emergencies to loot or otherwise profiteer. In other cases, both the military and police have charged people fleeing communal violence for transport to safety. This shows the link between military businesses with conflict areas where it appears that at this stage they could take advantage of the situation.

How do we handle it?

What is clear from the above is the existence of two critical levels of the conflict in Poso, the national and local. Currently the focus is on the national level but a more balanced approach to conflict resolution would perhaps help alleviate if not end the conflict.

First, at the national level the government must address the presence of JI and its affiliated members. This can only be done after there is a better understanding of JI's penetration in the conflict zone. This will permit the proper balance between the security and counter-ideological response.

Second, the government must also address the corruption and other structural issues found in the security services and political sectors in Poso. The inappropriate actions by political, business, and security elites are aggravating an already tense situation. This provides the space for JI and others to exploit for their own ends. The most critical areas to address are the local grievances where the youth are suffering from unemployment and the unresolved past killings of their relatives. A brighter economic future will reduce the number of potential recruits for the extremists.

However, poverty reduction alone will not end violence. There has to be a mechanism to address the grievances of both pre- and post-conflict Poso. This includes an open and honest investigation of deaths during the conflict, and perhaps either punishment or a truth and reconciliation process. This will help remove vengeance as one of the motivations for future violence.

Ultimately, the focus needs to be on the mindset and values of the community. Currently violent extremists have dominated the political space in Poso. If the above steps are taken, it will permit moderate, non-violent, religious leaders to assert themselves. A secure Poso, with a vibrant economy, and an assertive moderate community will make it virtually impossible for extremists to find sympathizers, let alone supporters, in their struggle.

None of this is possible if the conflict is misunderstood. Thus is the conflict in Poso all about JI? No, it involves JI, but the roots of the conflict rest with local concerns. The exploitation of this conflict by various elements has clearly deepened the aggravation. The continued emphasis on JI and its role in Poso will blind the government to the root causes of the conflict as well as its solutions. Ironically, this creates the very situation the government claims currently exists.

* *Evan A. Laksmna is a Research Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*