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Indonesia's Counter Radicalisation Programme: Challenges from the Radicals

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Synopsis

Indonesia is hailed as a country which has effectively used a hard approach to counter terrorism. But while terrorist organisations can be dismantled, eradicating terrorism is a different matter altogether.

Commentary

THE INDONESIAN government has realised the importance of winning hearts and minds of the public and educating them on the dangers of extremist ideology. This awareness is evident in the establishment of the National Counter Terrorism Agency, better known by its Indonesian acronym: BNPT (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme) whose responsibility includes organising public education programmes. However, BNPT's programme is facing strong counter-campaigns from radicals; BNPT may need to revise its approach to achieve its objectives.

Since November 2010, BNPT has organised at least a dozen seminars on deradicalisation within the Muslim community in Indonesia. BNPT cooperated with the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) – a semi-government body that comprises representatives of various Muslim organisations in Indonesia – at the national level and with other Muslim organisations and non-governmental organisations.

Radicals' Responses

The radicals have responded cleverly to the government's campaign against them. Within a week of BNPT's deradicalisation seminar, Islamic Ummah Forum (Forum Umat Islam/FUI) swiftly organised a counter seminar. MUI's branch in Solo, which does not share the stance of MUI at the national level, even published a book on countering BNPT's deradicalisation programme and has pledged to organise a series of counter seminars in every city where BNPT had previously held seminars. The series of seminars held by MUI Solo invited speakers from different backgrounds including BNPT, academicians and also prominent Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) figures such as Abu Rusydan.

These seminars were held in university campuses, thus giving credibility to its programmes. Furthermore, BNPT's deradicalisation seminars are also heavily criticised in various radical study groups, websites, banners, and even JI-linked magazine, An-Najah (The Success), which carried a special edition on Indonesia's deradicalisation programme.

Since BNPT deradicalisation seminars highlight the Chairman of BNPT Ansyad Mbai, a retired top police officer, while not resorting much to the presence of Muslim clerics, the radicals question his credential to speak

on Islamic concepts such as *al-wala' wal bara'* (loyalty and enmity), *jihad* (struggle) and *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance). BNPT is also portrayed as an anti-Islam institution. Such attacks could eventually further undermine BNPT's credibility in carrying out the counter radicalisation programmes. The concerted response from the radicals should not be underestimated as they had garnered up to 5,000 participants in one of its seminars, outnumbering the participants in BNPT's seminar.

Recommendations for BNPT

BNPT has, however, claimed success through the dozens of public engagement programmes it organised since its inception in July 2010. A recent radicalism index survey conducted by Lazuardi Birru, an NGO specialised in countering radicalisation, found a slight decline in radicalism in Indonesia. Ansyaad Mbai claimed that this decline was due to the deradicalisation efforts of BNPT. Nevertheless BNPT is not immune to challenges and criticism. It needs to consider the following for a more effective approach:

Firstly, BNPT needs to differentiate between deradicalisation programmes for radicals and convicted terrorists, and a programme for public awareness on the dangers of extremism and terrorism. Since the target audience for its seminars is the larger segment of the Muslim community, the term "deradicalisation" should be avoided. Labelling the seminars "deradicalisation" gives an impression that the government is implying that the participants are radicals to begin with.

Secondly, while public education programmes in Indonesia have included Islamic terms misused by the radicals – such as '*al-wala wal bara'*', '*jihad*' and '*bai'ah*' – these concepts should be explained by those who are qualified to do so. Rather than having security and intelligence officers speak on religion, mainstream Muslim scholars should be the ones to address the Muslim audience to clarify those concepts in accordance with Islamic teachings.

Muslim scholars who engage in public seminars should also be intellectually equipped to counter radical ideology and should be prepared to calmly address issues posed by radicals among the participants. This would help the counter radicalism efforts gain more credibility among Muslim audiences.

BNPT is aware of the importance of cooperating with the mainstream Muslim organisations and has signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with at least eight Islamic institutions to implement the educational counter terrorism programmes. It is best to let those Islamic institutions do the counter radicalisation work in the community while the BNPT continues with public engagement in security or non-religious topics. If necessary, seminars related to counter radicalisation efforts should not have BNPT officers as speakers or publicised as organisers.

Awareness Raising

Radicals and extremists will never cease their efforts to spread their ideology to the community both in the cyber domain and in the 'real world'. Thus, in counter terrorism, raising community awareness on the danger of terrorism is as crucial as dismantling a terrorist network. While BNPT's educational approach deserves commendation, its strategies can still be further refined. Prudence in counter radicalisation efforts is crucial.

The main aim of BNPT's engagement programme is winning the support of the larger community and inoculating it against extremism. Winning public support is what the radicals seek as well.

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