



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 011/2012 dated 13 January 2012

Freelance Fighters and ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Terrorism: What Lies Ahead for Indonesia

By Sulastri Osman

Synopsis

The acts of terrorism perpetrated by Indonesia’s violent fringe in 2011 suggest that organised groups, even ideology, are increasingly irrelevant. Freelance fighters and individual ‘do-it-yourself’ attacks are expected to become more common features of terrorism in the country.

Commentary

DESPITE THE many battles won in the fight against terrorism, the war is far from over. The terrorist incidents that took place over the past year raise questions about the long-term effectiveness of Indonesia’s counterterrorism strategy.

The litany of terrorist incidents range from bombs concealed inside books delivered to several public figures; to a suicide bomber blowing himself up in a mosque within a police compound in Cirebon, West Java; a police post in Palu, Central Sulawesi being attacked by gunmen; a 16-year-old pesantren student stabbing to death a police officer in Bima, West Nusa Tenggara; a standoff between weapon-wielding students from the same boarding school and the police after a bomb went off at the site; and a church in Solo being hit by another suicide bomber.

Fighting freelance

The gamut of incidents points to the entrenchment of a practice long in place but becoming palpable with the uncovering in 2010 of the lintas tanzim cell operating in Aceh – that is, cross-group cooperation among like-minded militants. The ongoing police investigations and terrorist trials that took place throughout the year shed more light on the trend.

High-profile recidivists like Aman Abdurrahman, Abdullah Sunata and Abu Tholut have revealed that they need not operate merely within the confines of their respective group structures. In reality, it was their disillusionment with existing jihadi organisations, particularly Jemaah Islamiyah, for “not doing enough”, as well as their antipathy toward the indiscriminate violence carried out by Noordin Top’s splinter group, that spurred them to coalesce into a loosely structured cell.

They advocated a strategic balance between dakwah (religious outreach) and militancy. Brought together through extensive personal ties, close to 80 men with allegiances to an assortment of groups including KOMPAK, Ring Banten and Darul Islam, joined the militant camp. Evidently, they thought themselves

“freelance” fighters. Abdullah Sunata had in fact admitted to being one during an interview in 2009.

Similarly, the individuals involved in last year’s attacks appeared to have viewed themselves in the same light. Sya’aban Abdurahman was reported to be part of Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) when he killed the policeman in Bima; but his association with the group was only by way of his school’s headmaster, Abrori, who had himself moved away from it because he was critical of its policies. Likewise, Pepi Fernando, the mastermind behind the book bombs, was initially part of the Darul Islam circle but left because he was frustrated by its refusal to engage in violent jihad.

‘Do-it-yourself’ terrorism

While the decision to eschew group allegiances and go ‘freelance’ are functions of personal and practical concerns, the declining importance of organisations is also indicative of an ideological shift occurring on the ground. For one, spectacular large-scale attacks targeting foreigners are giving way to targeted assassinations of the local police who have been labelled “enemies of Islam” because of their often deadly raids against terrorists. Also, finding fertile ground is Arabic language jihadi literature calling for individual operations over organisational ones based on the principle of jihad fardiyah (individual jihad).

These have encouraged a fresh wave of “do-it-yourself jihad”, according to Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group. Sya’aban Abdurahman, for example, had independently initiated the attack on the police officer, and Pepi Fernando had not only learned how to assemble explosives on the Internet but had also chosen his targets by typing in keywords online.

A worrying feature is that these incidents involved individuals largely outside known terrorist networks. While this shows the difficulties new operatives face in gaining access to or collaborating with experienced terrorists because of heavy police crackdown, the phenomenon underscores how intelligence lags behind the constantly evolving developments in jihadist operations.

Another cause for worry is the appearance of novel channels of radicalisation among the latest incarnation of terrorists. Pepi Fernando, previously a filmmaker and a reporter for a local television infotainment programme, appeared most keen on generating maximum publicity for his terror plots. That was arguably why his book bombs went out to prominent personalities, and why he roped in Imam Mukhammad Firdaus, a professional cameraman, for his bomb plot on a church in Serpong, West Java. Imam, a man with no history of radical activities, agreed to help. Al-Jazeera was even contacted for a chance at getting an exclusive footage.

Greg Fealy of the Australian National University has noted the unpredictable radicalisation trajectories of individuals who engage in terrorism in Indonesia today. The young, technologically connected, who often have good job prospects, and who might not at all be committed to the Salafi jihadi ideology, or even religious, are adding to the diverse assortment.

Vigilantes slipping under the radar

Still, a somewhat more familiar radicalisation pathway towards terrorism has been slipping under the radar of the authorities. Sporadic outbreaks of violence against religious minorities in 2011 have increasingly blurred the lines between vigilantism and thuggery, and terrorism. In what might be the year’s most extreme case, mob violence in Cikeusik, Banten in February led to the brutal deaths of three Ahmadis.

Significantly, because of the way the incident was handled by a police force that lacked both capacity and neutrality to restore order, it paved the way for numerous other incidents to escalate, resulting in more instances of aggression towards religious minorities. President Yudhoyono’s general inaction has further served as a signal that such extremists can act with impunity.

Muhammad Syarif, for instance, was known for years to be a familiar face at demonstrations and rallies organised by Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and other hardline groups. However, he was largely considered just a street menace. While the link between radicalism and violence is neither linear nor inevitable, it is crucial to examine what can make a religious bigot turn into a suicide bomber. The Indonesian authorities might do well to review their counter-terrorism strategies as new players surface on the violent fringe. An honest evaluation of all contributing factors is necessary.

Sulastri Osman is an Associate Research Fellow with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.