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Social Media and Terrorism in Indonesia: Enhancing or Diluting its Appeal?

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Synopsis

The online Bahasa Indonesia extremist community no longer exists exclusively in a world of its own, in password-protected forums. Members also participate in social media, exposing themselves to a wider audience and softening their extremist image. How does this affect the adherents of extremist ideology, and Indonesian society as a whole?

Commentary

THE RECENT cyber clash involving online movements, *#IndonesiaTanpaFPI* (Indonesia without Islamic Defenders' Front) and *#IndonesiaTanpaJIL* (Indonesia without Liberal Islam Network) presents us with an interesting finding – acceptance of communities with different beliefs by the online Bahasa Indonesia extremist community. This was not the case in the past. Then, the online extremist community was not observed to support or consent to the mainstream community while the latter had supported the online extremist community and its cause.

These mainstream supporters do not necessarily adhere to the extremist ideology. For instance, fans of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's Facebook included individuals with a lifestyle that would be regarded as unislamic to the extremist community. However, recent online movements mentioned above observed a reciprocal step by the online extremist community. Here, individuals who did not adhere to the extremist ideology such as celebrities Fauzi Baadila and Hari Moekti, as well as a Christian individual who wrote a letter showing her support for FPI, were highlighted and complimented in extremist online sites which followed the cyber clash. What does this seemingly growing affinity mean and what could it lead to?

Successful terrorists' strategy?

From a security standpoint, this situation signifies a successful terrorist strategy both in the online and offline domain. This is because of the terrorists' presence within the online extremist community, and their manning of important social media pages and sites. Online, the situation provides terrorist sites with features that can further enhance their lure to the community at large in two ways. Firstly, the situation presents a better dissemination of information and provides terrorist materials exposure to a wider audience. Secondly, it diminishes the 'terrorist' image of extremist online sites manned by terrorist groups and gives them a stronger

façade of being a credible information source of mainstream Islamic materials.

On the ground, the situation helps rebuild the strength of terrorist groups through the gathering of more supporters and sympathisers from the larger Indonesian society. This is advantageous for terrorist groups particularly in view of the crackdown on them by the Indonesian authorities. It is also especially worrying in the long run as it presents an increasing tolerance for extremism in the Indonesian society – a development powerful enough to influence policies and political shifts in Indonesia as a young democracy. This would provide legitimate space for terrorist groups to prosper, thus aggravating the problem.

Counter ideology at play?

However, the situation is not all smooth for the terrorists. The practice of freedom of speech in social media is self-correcting and provides numerous platforms for debates for the society. This helps curb terrorists' influence in society in two ways. Firstly, from the psychological standpoint, the concern that cyberspace provides another dimension for online radicalisation is reduced. An individual tends to believe in an ideology through group-think that can be facilitated in a space restricted to only people with the same thinking. With social media, this is no longer valid.

Secondly, just like what has been observed in the recent online movements of #IndonesiaTanpaJIL and #IndonesiaTanpaFPI, the terrorist and extremist community would have to conform to the mainstream ideology if they want to retain their influence in Indonesian society. Ideally, one could hope that these online activities would lead to a natural counter ideological mechanism to be at play. However, there would still be questions as to whether terrorist groups are taking on mainstream ideas genuinely or as a façade to lure more sympathisers, supporters and recruits.

What Next?

At present, terrorist groups and the other communities supporting them and vice versa are still different entities. They do not support each other but simply lean on one another to cope with shared grievances and uphold the same cause over issues such as corruption in the government and abolishing bad elements in the society based on shared moral judgments. Nonetheless, these intermingling of extremists and mainstream communities online cannot be dismissed altogether. Although they do not provide concrete analysis on terrorists' influence on the ground, they represent weak signals that cannot be ruled out in counter terrorism efforts.

Previously, the strategies to confronting online extremism were through covert penetration or disruption of online sites. Now, the intermingling of the extremist and mainstream communities provides opportunities to engage in open debate and even to challenge extremist narrative and ideology. However, it cannot be construed as a self-correcting mechanism. Protective strategies such as deliberate engagement in debate with extremist elements online are still important to reduce the appeal of terrorists within Indonesian society.

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