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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Ten Years After Bali: Rise of the Darul Islam Super-Organism**

By Kumar Ramakrishna

### **Synopsis**

*Ten years after the 2002 Bali bombings, the dominant “kinetic” approach to counter-terrorism in Indonesia has reached its limits. Fresh approaches are needed to deal with a constantly evolving and resilient super-organism of extremism.*

### **Commentary**

ON THE tenth anniversary of the suicide bombings in Bali on 12 October 2002 by Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists that resulted in 202 civilian deaths, what have the security authorities in Indonesia and the region learned in the ensuing decade? Three lessons seem pertinent:

Firstly, “hard” or “kinetic” measures are insufficient to neutralise violent extremism. Certainly over the past decade the Indonesian security forces, in particular the crack Police Detachment 88, have excelled in arresting and eliminating scores of dangerous militants. Since the 2002 attacks, more than 700 militants have been arrested and scores more killed. And yet senior Indonesian counter-terrorism officials admit that the threat stubbornly persists. Just last month 10 terror suspects were arrested.

#### **Force alone will fail**

Secondly, physical force alone has at times even exacerbated the problem. One puzzled top Indonesian official asserted: “The more physical pressure is brought to bear upon” the terrorist networks “the more militant and radical they become.” Excessive police use of force helped precipitate a militant shift from targeting Westerners only to include the security forces and senior government officials. It is clear that they cannot shoot their way out of the terrorism problem.

Thirdly, unless the underlying conditions that foment terrorism are addressed, new militant leaders and followers will replenish losses. While socio-economic factors, perceived injustices, as well as historical tensions with the secular State are part of the explanatory mix, what integrates these elements together is a violent ideology, which is not wholly global or local, but a combustible mixture of both.

In Indonesia today there are two ideological frames interacting with each other. The first is Al Qaedaism, which emphasises the global threat to Muslim communities from an international conspiracy led by the United States and Israel. The second more indigenous frame is Darul Islamism. This comprises stock themes of continuing

conflict with the secular Indonesian State. This narrative resonates with communities historically associated with the Darul Islam separatist movement. Darul Islam was the wellspring of Jemaah Islamiyah in the 1990s as well as one of the latest institutional “mutations,” Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid, or JAT.

### **The Darul Islam “Super-organism”**

The employment of the term “mutation” is deliberate. Indonesian counter-terrorism officials have observed that the security forces seem to be confronted with disparate cells which have different leaders and appear to plan attacks independently. And yet there remains this “interconnectivity that makes them all part of one large network”. What the Indonesian security forces are facing today is not actually a hodgepodge of isolated militant cells engaged in private, unrelated little jihads with the Indonesian State and at times Westerners. Rather, what they are facing is a complex, self-organising, adaptive system – or super-organism.

A complex system comprises numerous independent agents interacting with one another in multiple unpredictable ways. It is self-organising as there is no conscious central direction of these “disparate cells” with “different leaders” planning attacks “independently”. But most of all, the system is adaptive because it is guided by an internal logic: to continually keep pace with a changing environment – and survive.

Complex systems are everywhere in nature; human social networks – like the one currently causing mayhem in Indonesia - are such systems as well. In fact network theorists would add that complex social networks guided by a “sticky” ideological mix of Al Qaedaism and Darul Islamism can well be seen as a super-organism possessing a life of its own. A super-organism can be “intelligent” even when its constituent units are not, the way an ant colony is intelligent though individual ants are not.

In a human super-organism, individuals are engaged in mutually influencing one another, but without necessarily knowing each other or consciously coordinating their behaviour. This may be why befuddled Indonesian officials intuit that separate militant splinter cells appear independent and yet do not seem that independent at their core. Indonesians are facing the latest mutation of the old Darul Islam Super-organism: resilient and continually adapting to survive amidst evolving global and domestic ideological influences and environmental pressures.

### **Implications: Strategic influence, not control**

What holds super-organisms together is not strategic control, as in a top-down hierarchical organisation. Instead what causes the various looser elements of the Darul Islam Super-organism to cohere, be it the relatively structured JAT, the currently low-profile JI, and the countless new permutations like the recently discovered Al Qaeda in Indonesia cell – is strategic influence. Strategic influence is created by the ideological ecosystem of the Darul Islam Super-organism – those religious boarding schools, mosques, private study circles, radical book launches and other similar insulated enclaves. Such ecosystem “nodes” generate commonly shared narratives or stories that provide overall structure and guidance for the thinking and behavior of the super-organism’s widely dispersed constituent units.

Two counter-measures seem germane.

Firstly, a systematic root-and-branch effort is needed to dismantle the ideological ecosystem of the Darul Islam Super-organism. It is telling that Indonesia’s National Counter-Terrorism Agency, BNPT, has recently declared its intention to co-ordinate a national “de-radicalisation” effort involving multiple stakeholders to combat violent extremist narratives. Such an effort, though difficult, needs to be executed in an intelligence-led fashion against key ecosystem nodes.

Secondly, the critical thinking skills of young Indonesians need enhancing. University of Indonesia researcher Yon Machmudi observes that university students “don’t try to critically evaluate the content” of what is online. They do not compare and contrast information sources, and tend to accept only one point of view. Researcher Noor Huda Ismail also warns that the “poorly developed critical thinking skills” of young Indonesians make it very “easy for a charismatic figure to brainwash them” into embracing extremist narratives.

A decade after Bali, the dominant kinetic approach to counter-terrorism in Indonesia has reached its apogee. As the ancient philosopher of war Sun Tzu reminds: “We must fight with wisdom, and not just force alone.”

*Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor and Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.*