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The HASMI Network: Case of Cognitive Radicalism Turned Violent?

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Synopsis

The recently discovered HASMI militant network may be a mutation of the older JI and JAT networks. More ominously, it may be an example of how non-violent cognitive radicalism can become violent.

Commentary

THE RECENT arrests by police in Indonesia of 11 militant suspects belonging to a new network called the Sunni Movement for Indonesian Society - Harkat Sunni untuk Masyarakat Indonesia or HASMI - affirm that the violent extremist threat in the country remains a concern. Despite the arrest of more than 700 militants in the decade since the Bali bombings of October 2002, violent extremism in the country remains stubbornly resilient and morphing in new and unpredictable ways.

The eminent traditionalist Muslim leader Mustofa Bisri, better known to followers in his Central Java heartland as Gus Mus, hit the nail on the head when he lamented that the violent extremist movement in the country “keeps popping up and spawning new terrorists”.

HASMI as mutation of JI/JAT

To be sure, there is a Bogor-based and legitimately registered mass Muslim organisation called HASMI which denies any links with the new militant network. Registered HASMI insists that its focus is on “formal education and peaceful preaching”. To their credit, the Indonesian police are not rushing to conclusions either. They accept that it may be a case of the same name being used by different entities – one a legitimate organisation and the other a network of extremist militants.

The police note that while the “faces” of the HASMI network are “100 percent new” and have never been linked to the “old networks” such as Jemaah Islamiyah and the newer Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), they strongly suspect that such links will eventually be uncovered. In fact it is said that the HASMI leader Abu Hanifah, is a JI and JAT sympathiser. That may well be the case.

Thanks to a combination of determined security force pressure and ideological influences from the Middle East, both JI and in recent times JAT do not function as hierarchical organisations exerting top-down strategic control over their constituent cells. Instead, through an ideological ecosystem of private religious meetings, religious boarding schools, mosques, jihad-themed websites and even book launches by well-known radical writers, the

ideological vision of JI and JAT exerts strategic influence over a constituency that is widely scattered throughout the archipelago.

In the past two years since the violent break-up by the police of the so-called Al Qaeda in Aceh training camp associated with JAT, new “mutations” of this constituency have evolved, tenuously associated with one another and variously calling themselves Al Qaeda in Indonesia, the Mujahidin in Eastern Indonesia and now HASMI. Strategic influence over such a dispersed movement is exercised in the form of common memorable narratives and stories of how the Muslim community in Indonesia faces an existential threat from infidel and apostate enemies both near and far, and why resort to violence is both a moral and religious obligation.

It seems that two violent ideological frames are circulating and mixing with each other: the older Darul Islam frame which posits the secular Indonesian security forces and government officials as the enemy, and the Al Qaedaist frame that identifies the West as the real threat. The target selection of the HASMI network reveals this admixture clearly: not only were the US embassy in Jakarta, the US Consulate in Surabaya, Plaza 89 near the Australian embassy in Jakarta and the Jakarta offices of mining company Freeport-McMoran to be attacked, the Central Java headquarters of the Police Mobile Brigade was also on the list.

In short, depending on the idiosyncratic syntheses of elements of Darul Islamism and Al Qaedaism by the leaders of each new cell emerging from the wider violent extremist milieu, both local security and government officials and Western diplomatic missions, businesses and civilians will continue to be targeted.

HASMI a mutation of registered HASMI

The above analysis is premised on the assumption that HASMI has its ultimate origins in the older networks such as JI and JAT. But an alternative analysis is also possible. While registered HASMI claims that its focus is on formal education and peaceful preaching, what is of interest here is the content of its educational and preaching activities. As it turns out, registered HASMI seems to differ in orientation from the bigger and older mass organisations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama that have long provided religious sanction for Indonesian pluralism.

The members of registered HASMI have never been involved in violent activity. Yet it is noteworthy that they have taken part in anti-Christian protests. Moreover its theological vision is regarded as relatively puritanical and it is said to have called for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate to replace the Indonesian State. In operation since 2005, registered HASMI runs its own school and community radio station. In this connection, one wonders if the registered HASMI community is an insulated enclave. In such a relatively isolated community, a particular narrative fashioned by key elders is more or less adhered to, and alternative viewpoints are scarce. Hence assuming that registered HASMI possesses a dominant anti-Christian, anti-secular bias, its community may well have become cognitively radicalised.

That is, the members of such a “cognitively radicalised” community would tend to see the world in strongly binary, us-and-them, good-versus-evil terms. Religiously legitimated social and moral distancing from ostensibly “polluting” out-group contact would be encouraged. To be sure, cognitive radicals do not necessarily and automatically have to be violent radicals tomorrow. Nevertheless some cognitive radicals are arguably primed mentally and emotionally for transition to violent action. Which is why the comment by one Indonesian observer that the recently arrested “terror suspects are former HASMI members who then joined violent jihadist movements and established a new group” is loaded with significance and deserves greater analysis.

Scholars of religious extremism have long noted that “violent potentials” exist within non-violent cognitive radicalism. Hence if the links between the cognitive radicalism of registered HASMI and the violent radicalism of militant HASMI are definitively established, that would be a cause for concern.

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