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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Counter-Radicalisation in Indonesia: Fighting a Mutating Organism**

By Adhi Priamarizki

### **Synopsis**

*Terrorist cells still exist in Indonesia despite the Indonesian security authorities having achieved success in their counter-terrorism operations. Counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts need to be adapted to changing challenges.*

### **Commentary**

ALTHOUGH THE Jemaah Islamiyah network in Indonesia has been mortally wounded due to disruption by the security authorities, terrorism is still a threat in the country 10 years after the Bali bombing. Though smaller in scale, Indonesia's terrorist groups have continued to operate across the archipelago.

The presence of splinter groups such as those behind the 2011 suicide bombing of a police mosque in Cirebon, has raised doubts about Indonesia's counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts.

Indeed questions arise as to what makes Indonesia a fertile ground for radicalisation and hinders the counter-terrorism efforts.

### **Democracy, radicalisation and diversity**

One school of thought suggests that the growth of democracy in Indonesia has created space for the development of radicalism and the revival of JI by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Basyir after the collapse of the New Order regime. However another school argues that JI arose initially as a rejection of the secular reformasi movement as well as the secular government. It benefited from both the growing resistance to the Suharto regime and the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It was not democratisation per se that triggered the radicalisation process in Indonesia.

Yet another school of thought suggests that promoting moderation which is inherent in Islam can debunk or counter the tendencies towards radical violence. While this is a valid approach for improving the counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts, it needs to take into account the varied make-up of Indonesian Islam itself.

The discourse on Islam in Indonesia has never been dominated by one single Islamic thought from the very beginning of Islam's arrival in the nusantara or what is now Southeast Asia. Although the traditionalist Nahdlatul

Ulama (NU) and the modernist Muhammadiyah are the dominant actors in Indonesian Islam, there are many other Islamic groups that influence society in Indonesia. Most of these Islamic groups do not readily or wholeheartedly accept the arguments of the mainstream Islamic groups, including NU and Muhammadiyah. In other words, these groups agree to disagree with each other regarding their differing persuasions within the larger Islamic society.

Hence it would be ineffective to promote de-radicalisation efforts by cooperating with only one or some of these groups. There is a need to reach out to a wider range of Islamic groups to enhance the counter-radicalisation and counter-terrorism strategies.

### **Local factors**

There is also a need to understand local incubating factors behind the new genre of terrorism. According to a foreign counter-terrorism expert Ali Soufan, as cited in Tempo magazine, local elements are now paramount in launching a person on the path of radical violence. These elements could be economic, political, or even ethnic in nature. Thus, to achieve effective counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts, local factors should be better understood by the authorities.

In the Indonesian context, these local aspects also play a crucial role in the radicalisation process. Even though it is not a primary factor, socio-economic injustice could become a trigger for people to become radical or even engage in extreme violence. Such conditions of socio-economic injustice is not only associated with poverty. In fact, not all poverty-stricken people become terrorists. On the contrary, there is evidence that affluent people can also become terrorists, with Pepi Fernando the best example. Holding a university degree and enjoying a middle class income, Pepi was the mastermind of six terrorist attacks in 2011, including one on President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as well as sending “book-bombs” to several Indonesian figures.

Further, the primary targets of the recent attacks are no longer Western-affiliated institutions or venues. The terrorists direct their attacks at the local government, especially the police. An effective counter-terrorism campaign is one of the triggers of the recent attacks on the police whom the terrorists see now as their main enemy because the police are the key players in the capture of the terrorists.

Moreover, the counter-terrorism measures have been able to disrupt the terrorist networks. The terrorists are impeded materially in their access to resources and ideologically by the changing preferences of their supporters. Consequently, the terrorists need to adjust their missions, and the local authorities are seen as their new targets.

### **Implications for counter-radicalisation efforts**

Although the counter-terrorism efforts in Indonesia have produced notable achievements, such as the detention of several JI members, and the counter-terrorist authorities such as Detachment 88 have the upper hand, more radical groups are still emerging. The Indonesian government must maintain its vigilance to prevent the possibility of more terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the time is right for the government to develop a more comprehensive strategy in counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation by involving all Islamic groups in Indonesia to counter ideas that support radical violence.

The Indonesian government should maintain a stable socio-economic environment to prevent the spread of radical ideas while practising good governance and sustaining a democratic climate that guarantees the people’s rights.

Poor governance could render the people susceptible to radical ideas, which they see as a solution for their problems. Like a mutating organism, the terrorists always adjust to their circumstances and try to find the weakest parts of the society to exploit. Therefore, counter-terrorism must be ever responsive to such mutations.

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