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Counter-Terrorism in Indonesia: The End of Special Detachment 88?

By Adhi Priamarizki

Synopsis

There is an ongoing debate between the Indonesian government and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) whether to discharge the increasingly controversial anti-terrorism Special Detachment 88 unit. This is in light of several human rights violations during the unit's missions.

Commentary

THERE HAS been a sudden demand from the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and other Islamic organisations for investigations and even to dismiss, if necessary, the counter-terrorism Special Detachment 88 due to alleged human rights abuses. Apparently, the trigger was the emergence of a video of terrorist suspects being tortured by Indonesian police officers that went viral.

This turn of events has led to the vice president of the MUI and also the chairman of the Muhammadiyah organisation, Din Syamsudin, to launch a special request to the Indonesian police (POLRI) to investigate the activities of the Special Detachment 88, better known by its local acronym Densus 88. Din Syamsudin also hinted of a possible dismissal of the unit if it is found guilty of these charges. In replacement, he asked the Indonesian government to create a new institution.

Criticism of Densus 88

Densus 88 has been doing a marvellous job in countering the terrorist threat in Indonesia. The detachment also played an integral part in penetrating the Jemaah Islamiyah network in the Indonesian archipelago. Despite these achievements, some of the fundamentalist groups often accused the detachment's effort in combating terrorists as un-Islamic or an attack on the religion. The urgency to neutralise the terrorist threat has put Densus 88 in a very delicate position, frequently treading a fine-line between being a hero and a villain.

Not surprisingly, Densus 88 has come under scrutiny and criticism several times because of its activities. Previously, the detachment made an error in identifying terrorist suspects during the raid in Karanganyar, Central Java in 2012. There were also other blunders committed by the detachment unit in its history. In an operation in August 2009, Densus 88 raided alleged terrorist ring leader Noordin M. Top's safe-house but failed to capture him, even though Noordin was eventually killed in their next operation in September 2009. These few incidents had led to major questions being asked, chief of which is this: Is Densus 88 in need of a revamp? Should the detachment unit be retained or should the Indonesian government create a new institution in place

of it?

To tackle those questions, the Indonesian government needs to review the unit's performance and come up with a mechanism to evaluate it, especially its methodology in combating a potential terrorist.

Defending the defender

MUI was also for the idea of replacing Densus 88 with a new institution but performing almost the same duties. This idea however needs to be assessed carefully. The creation of a new establishment could lead to even more problems if hastily implemented. Evidently, there could be a question of continuity in authority, the most crucial being continuity from the previous organisation to the new one.

Counter-terrorism is a never-ending process more akin to a marathon than a sprint contest. If there is any interruption in the process, counter-terrorism efforts could be jeopardised. Moreover, such activities do not always end with arrests or the punishment of the convicted terrorist but are implemented to prevent any subsequent attacks so as to disrupt the terrorist network. There must inevitably be a provision for continuity in the new counter-terrorism outfit.

The existence of Densus 88 is still of great importance as they have to respond to and avert any terrorist attacks in the shortest possible time. Likewise, the creation of a new agency could create new difficulties or even hold back counter-terrorism efforts because its implementation will take extra time, effort and money.

What needs to be done?

It would be impractical to regulate the behaviour of Densus 88 through a rigid operating procedure especially when responding to potential terrorist threats. On the other hand, it would be better to focus the evaluation based on the operations of the detachment comprising the following steps:

Firstly, it is necessary to establish an evaluation mechanism which is led by elements within Densus 88. This evaluation mechanism should focus on analysing the efficacy of the detachment's missions. Such a mechanism will provide timely analysis and feedback on the delicate context and environment in which Densus 88 carries out its missions. It will also be very useful in reassessing and improving its next operation or during follow-up missions.

An experienced personnel within the detachment will be equipped with more insights when scrutinising the unit's accomplished missions as this person would already know the field situation better than an outsider.

Secondly, Densus 88 needs to improve the coordination of operations with the local police. The local knowledge of the regional police is critical in achieving a successful mission. Additionally, the efficacy of the operation could reduce the number of casualties. This is crucial since mass casualties could create martyrdom among the terrorists which will only serve their cause to attract new followers. Furthermore, effective tracking and detection of the scattered and dispersed terrorists will require sufficient local information which can be obtained largely from the local police.

Balancing the assessment

Densus 88's core mission to defeat terrorism in Indonesia should not be confused with its technical weaknesses, such as faults in the unit's methods to restrain and detain terrorist suspects. Therefore, the evaluation should be on the detachment's methods in combating the terrorist rather than the existence of the counterterrorism agency per se.

In addition, we should keep in mind the detachment's remarkable achievements in countering the terrorist threat in the country. The assessment of the unit should be done in terms of its overall performance, not just its recent shortcomings.

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