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Funerals of Suspected Terrorists in Indonesia: A Rallying Point?

By Sulastri Osman

Synopsis

The presence of different radical Muslim groups at the funerals of suspected terrorists killed in police raids demonstrate how such events could become a rallying point. Yet, the same funerals also showcase why the radical fringe remains fragmented.

Commentary

TWO SUSPECTED terrorists were shot dead on 22 July 2013 in Tulungagung, East Java by the country's elite police unit Detachment 88. The men were suspected to be part of the *Mujahidin Indonesia Timur* terror network operating in Poso, Central Sulawesi where more intensive counterterrorism measures are currently underway.

As investigations into the men's precise roles in the network went underway, their bodies were held in Jakarta and thereafter returned to their respective hometowns for their last funeral rites. If the funerals that took place in May 2013 in the wake of a series of similarly deadly police raids across Central and West Java revealed anything, it is the apparent readiness among the radical Muslim fringe to rally in unity.

Convergence of the radicals

Regardless of different group affiliations, political objectives and creed, the spectrum – ranging from the non-violent puritans and hardline conservatives to the vigilante and jihadi communities of the quietist, firebrand and militant sorts – would converge at the funerals of suspected terrorists killed by the security forces.

At several of these events, known figures from *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), the clandestine organisation linked to some of the country's most egregious terrorist attacks, were present. They included some recently released from prison. Also present were *Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid* (JAT) and *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI), particularly their local chapters. JAT is an above-ground organisation that advocates jihad, rejects democracy and regards state laws illegitimate but strategically keeps its formal politics of contention within acceptable if debatable boundaries. FPI, on the other hand, fashions itself as the country's moral police and "sweeps" the city streets of vice and immorality.

Other vigilante groups like *Laskar Umat Islam Surakarta* were also there, alongside members of *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia*, a puritanical missionary organisation. There were also those without any formal group ties who independently offered pro bono legal aid and served as investigative journalists, building up

cases against the police and mainstream news outlets respectively. Then there were the local residents, who, at a number of the funerals, were of the traditionalist Islamic *Nadhatul Ulama* background. An uneasy mantle of cohesiveness draped over the funerals.

Dynamics on the ground

Such funerals warrant a closer look beyond the usual news reportage. For one, an examination of ground interactions between and among radical groups helps distill the key reasons behind why they come together. The death of men suspected to be terrorists – ‘suspected’ being the key word – at the hands of the police clearly has the ability to mobilise the fringe from far and wide.

Part of the pull is that, whilst somber affairs, there is fanfare nevertheless. There are mass prayer sessions, public sermons and high-profile radical figures on hand to field questions from the media. Banners are put up beforehand to welcome the bodies home and proclaim the dead to be martyrs; attendees clamour to seek out signs of martyrdom on the bodies and in the skies with their camera phones.

Beyond the novelty and curiosity, a common identity does link together those at the funerals. They all see themselves as “*aktivis Islam*” -- Islamic activists who seek to carve out a bigger public space for Islam, never mind that they often disagree over means. While many among them concede the futility of most terrorist violence, they argue that police suspicions are not sufficient grounds to shoot to kill a suspect for a dead man can offer no defence.

The real fear over unrestrained use of force by the police is that anyone among them can be the next victim. For many, the anxiety is also coloured by past confrontations with the authorities, which are not unusual since they continually test the boundaries of the law. Local *laskar* groups, in particular, tell stories of direct clashes with individual police personnel over religiosity matters like drinking and gambling. Distrust of the police accordingly runs high, and conspiracy theories are never in short supply.

Competition and convergence

Still, as much as groups on the fringe converge over a sense of shared grief and grievance, inter-group competition and clashing personalities are significant enough forces for divergence. At one funeral where the deceased was close to both FPI and JAT, members of the former barred the latter from attending the burial, apparently suspicious that JAT would poach its members.

Further, there was wariness that JAT, having often been linked to convicted terrorists, could cause the group further trouble. The episode subsequently led the local JAT leadership to forbid its members from attending the next funeral since FPI would be there too.

Likewise, JI members recently released from prison received lukewarm welcome from the group’s more ‘mainstream’ elements who were cautious they turned police informants while behind bars. JAT, being less discerning as a mass membership organisation, would court the former inmates – but much to the ire of JI. Such incidents demonstrate that competition, particularly between groups close to each other in terms of tactics of activism or ideology, leads to rivalry.

Understanding interactions among radical groups

Observing actual ground interactions among the radical groups can contribute to greater understanding of how they relate to one another. It also enables a proper mapping of their behaviours and tendencies as well as the contours of the groups. More practically, it helps inform policies concerned with the radical fringe and the varied actors within because they are far from being a homogenous lot. In fact, many within set themselves apart from those with terrorist intent.

Also, a greater understanding of the interactions among the radical groups can help in developing a more nuanced counterterrorism approach especially as an alternative to the unrestrained use of force in apprehending terrorist suspects -- which is the chief reason the fringe groups came together in the first place.

Such funerals – or other equally emotive events where there are grievances to tap – can surely provide the opportunity for the more terroristic elements to recruit new members. They are also a microcosm of less obvious yet important undercurrents of the radicalisation dynamics in Indonesia.

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