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Inter-Agency Dynamics in Indonesia

Shifting Sands: POLRI-TNI Ties in Counterterrorism

by Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

Despite many looming questions with regard to the rules of engagement, militarisation of counterterrorism in Indonesia seems to be an irreversible trend. Ruffled ties between the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) and the police (POLRI), however, continues to hinder interoperability between the two.

Commentary

IN THE SECOND week of May, [a string of terrorist](#) acts broke out in Indonesia, from a [prison riot at a police headquarters](#) in Depok, West Java, to suicide bombings on three [churches in Surabaya](#), East Java. Such a worrying development pushed President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to issue [an ultimatum](#) to the House of Representatives (DPR) to conclude the revision of the much-delayed Anti-Terrorism Law.

Otherwise, the President warned, he would issue a regulation in lieu of law (Perppu) to strengthen the authority of the state apparatus against acts of terrorism. While welcomed by some, such an ultimatum has generated some concerns, including the militarisation of the counterterrorism landscape.

Military's Move to Tweak Status Quo

On 8 January 2018, a letter was personally delivered by the newly appointed Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), Air Marshall Hadi Tjahjanto, to the DPR's Special Committee on Revision of the Anti-Terrorism Law.

[In the letter](#), Hadi not only posited the need for a bigger role for TNI in counterterrorism operations, but also specifically proposed to omit the word 'criminal' in the title, so it will read *Penanggulangan Aksi Terorisme* or translated as the Law on Countering the Act of Terrorism.

The Minister of Law and Human Rights, [Yasonna Laoly](#), insisted the name be kept as it is. At the heart of the disagreement, the fundamental question is whether the act of terrorism falls under the category of extraordinary crime thus warranting special measures such as the involvement of the military.

TNI's Role in Counterterrorism

Since 2000 TNI has attempted to change the status quo that tethered the military to operations led by the Indonesian Police (POLRI) when it comes to counter-terrorism operations. Among many changes proposed by TNI, one of the most pivotal is to remove the position of the supporting role or *bawah kendali operasi* (BKO). The consequence of such abolition is that TNI can wage independent counterterrorism operations without having to consult the DPR. Such a proposal, however, has faced enormous resistance from civil society.

TNI principally is inclined towards a vague law that enables the military or political leadership to flexibly define the circumstances of TNI intervention in counterterrorism. As explained by the Coordinating Minister of Politics, Legal, and Security Affairs, also a former Commander of TNI, [Wiranto](#), it is best if the law is not too detailed, as this can compromise speed and room for manoeuvre against terrorism.

Indeed, the revised law is likely to only give a broad-brush explanation on TNI's involvement and a presidential regulation will further specify the rules of engagement. Given their close relationship and President Jokowi's political reliance on many retired army generals such as Moeldoko, Luhut Panjaitan, Ryamizard Ryacudu, Wiranto, and Agum Gumelar; coupled with the good relationship between Hadi and the Chief of POLRI, Tito Karnavian, it is likely for the military to get what it wants – a bigger role in counterterrorism.

Since the success of the Tinombala Operation, a joint POLRI-TNI manoeuvre on 18 July 2016 led to the killing of Santoso, the leader of the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur. Given that this group pledged allegiance to Islamic State, the perception of TNI involvement has been overwhelmingly positive. On 29 May 2017, in a cabinet meeting, Jokowi reiterated the importance of having TNI involved.

Echoing such instruction, [Tito](#) argued that TNI is pivotal especially in circumstances such as hijacking at sea and operations in rough terrain such as mountains and jungles due to its guerilla warfare expertise. Furthermore, according to [a survey](#) conducted by Kompas (involving respondents from 14 cities around Indonesia), the majority of respondents (92.6 percent) supported TNI's involvement.

The survey, however, also indicated as much as 23.7 percent of respondents were worried about the potential of human rights abuses. This concern stemmed from the culture of impunity in the TNI. Due to the legal loopholes and the lack of checks and balances from civilians on the military, there is fear that the involvement of TNI can lead to abuse of power. Moreover, TNI personnel could not be tried under civilian courts.

Militarisation of Counterterrorism?

Despite the Anti-Terrorism Law not yet being revised, TNI and POLRI have been attempting since 2015 to improve interoperability in counterterrorism operations. Publicly known as the Group 5, two of the POLRI anti-terror special units known as Detachment 88 and Detachment C Gegana Brimob, have been working closely with three of the TNI's own.

The TNI units are namely Detachment 81 of the Army Special Forces (Kopassus), Detachment Jala Mengkara of the Marine Corps, and Bravo-90 Unit of the Air Force Infantry. Five of them are jointly stationed at the National Agency for Combating Terrorism BNPT under the auspices of the Centre for Crisis Control (Pusat Pengendalian Krisis – PUSDALSIS).

There have been a series of combined counter-terrorism training ongoing under the coordination of BNPT. For example, in April 2015, a week-long joint exercise called Gulkonsis V on counter terrorism operation against ISIS was held in a hotel in Sidoarjo, East Java. On 8 December 2016, the Gulkonsis VI was conducted in the Soekarno Hatta Airport, Tangerang, involving the Group 5, Aviation Security, and civilians. In October 2017, a joint terrorism training was also held in an offshore oil Rig in Pabelokan Island, North Jakarta.

On 18 May 2018, President Jokowi has also reinstated the formerly suspended [Koopsgubgab](#), a joint force of TNI's three anti-terror units, to assist the National Police during crisis conditions. These have highlighted the efforts to enhance interoperability between TNI and POLRI in counter terrorism operations.

The Persistence of Tension

Given the significant cuts in the military's authority coupled with the expansion of the police's role, and with the police and military sometimes sharing overlapping responsibilities, both institutions sometimes found themselves in opposition to one another. One example is an incident between TNI and POLRI on 27 July 2016, where Team 1 Tinombala Task Force, comprising Kopassus and the local military, was ambushed and attacked by personnel from POLRI Mobile Brigade.

The incident highlighted the lack of communication during the operation. According to the Centre for Political Studies in Bandung, between 1999 and 2014, there have been at least 200 cases of clashes with 20 fatalities. Such altercations show the competitive nature of both state institutions.

The ideal reconciliatory approach warrants a comprehensive solution, not only delineation of functions, but also enhancing interoperability and internal reform of both POLRI and TNI.

Emirza Adi Syailendra is a Senior Analyst at the Indonesia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This is part of a series on Inter-Agency Dynamics in Indonesia.

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Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg