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After Jokowi's First Term

What Next for Indonesian Militant Groups?

By V. Arianti

SYNOPSIS

After the 2019 presidential election that resulted in the victory of incumbent President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), Indonesian groups that support Al-Qaeda will likely continue to participate in the democratic process via Islamist rallies. Meanwhile, the groups that support the Islamic State (IS) may continue to plot attacks. Significantly both camps have sent fighters to Syria.

COMMENTARY

IN THE run-up to the April 2019 Indonesian general elections, including the presidential election, pro-IS groups urged their followers not to vote or attend the various rallies planned by the participating parties. In contrast, groups with links or are sympathetic to Al-Qaeda (AQ) participated in the electoral process as well as the rallies.

What are the perspectives of pro-IS and pro-AQ groups on activities related to the general elections such as voting and rallies? What are the security challenges posed by these groups in the aftermath of the elections to-date?

Pro-IS Groups

The key ideology of pro-IS groups in Indonesia is *tauhid* (Oneness of God), which is based on the fundamental tenet that all laws must be sourced from God. Democracy is seen as a man-made system with man-made laws. As such, they have labelled the government and its apparatus, as well as parliamentary members who formulate and execute laws and those participating in democracy (via elections, rallies, etc.), as apostates and unbelievers, tacitly making them the legitimate target of attacks.

This had been outlined by the most prominent Indonesian IS ideologue, Aman Abdurrahman, who is currently on death row, a number of years even before IS came into existence. Aman's writings which asserted the rejection of democracy for Muslims have been disseminated online by Indonesian IS supporters.

Prior to the April 2019 elections, the headlines of two consecutive editions of Indonesian pro-IS magazine *Hanifiyah Media* were "Syirik Parlemen dan Undang-Undang" (The Apostasy of the Parliament and Laws) and "Kutukan Ajaran Demokrasi" (Condemnation of the Teachings of Democracy), which reaffirmed their beliefs and heavily reminded the pro-IS community not to vote.

The pro-IS community generally condemns participation in any political rally, equating it to an act of conforming to democracy. It views participation in rallies, especially if they have large masses attending, as an opportunity to create chaos and launch attacks.

Pro-IS cells have been arrested for plotting attacks prior to and during highly-charged rallies in recent years such as rallies against then Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, in November 2016 and rallies in May 2019 to protest Jokowi's victory.

General elections, including connected rallies, are just one of the high-profile events that pro-IS groups typically target for attacks. Other events include Indonesia's Independence Day, Christmas and New Year's Eve, among others.

Pro-AQ Groups

Pro-AQ groups consist of those that support Al-Qaeda and refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the IS "caliphate". A key group is Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), aiming to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, which has evolved into different and separate permutations. The latter was partly centred on the then JI leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's decision to establish Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) in 2000. Ba'asyir then resigned from MMI and established Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) in 2008. JAT subsequently split into Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS) in 2014.

Overtly, the JI today has departed from its organisational manual known as PUPJI that obliged it to become a *tanzim sirri* (secret organisation). JI, MMI, and JAS appear to have evolved into non-violent political Islamist entities by participating in a political system they ideologically despise – democracy.

JI has approached political parties as part of the group's strategy to establish an Islamic state. MMI and JAS have further aspired for "NKRI Bersyariah" (Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia Adopting Sharia Law) through "constitutional jihad" – similar to that of other Indonesian Islamist groups.

This is an exercise of jihad via democratic means with the aim of introducing sharia into the political and legal system by participating in elections, mobilising people for rallies, as well as lobbying the government and parliament. For the pro-AQ groups, democracy can bring about not only a theocracy but also a "jihadocracy", a term coined by US-based terrorism expert Nelly Lahoud.

Next Round of Elections & ‘Jihadocracy’?

In the next round of elections – the governor and mayor/regent elections (*pilkada*) – that will be held simultaneously in 270 regions, consisting of nine provinces and 261 cities/regencies in September 2020, JI, MMI and JAS could continue supporting candidates perceived to be more accommodating towards the formalisation of sharia law.

Or they could at least encouraging their followers, through sermons and participation in rallies, not to vote for candidates who are deemed anti-Islam. Outside the election realm, they will possibly persist to collaborate with other Islamist groups as they have been doing so in recent times.

This will be manifested through rallies or political lobbying on ad-hoc issues pertaining to government policies deemed as anti-Islam; or conducting rallies in solidarity of Muslims from other nations who are perceived to be oppressed. Both camps share one thing in common: they have sent fighters to Syria. Pro-IS group Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) for instance, has sent fighters to fight alongside IS. JI, MMI and JAS have sent fighters to non-IS rebel groups there, including the AQ affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, currently known as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s (HTS).

The returnee fighters’ basic military skills, combat exposure, and international connections will pose a security challenge, especially when they transfer their skills and knowledge to fellow jihadists steeped in the desire to overturn Indonesia’s democracy. Despite pro-AQ groups not being involved in attacks in Indonesia in recent times, JI, for instance, has covertly prepared its members to conduct attacks and chaos that can be used during rallies.

The current anti-terrorism law can sufficiently prosecute those who commit attacks in the country – and to some extent, the returnees. However, the pro-AQ groups’ long-term goal of turning the country into a “jihadocracy” – by using the Indonesian democratic system itself – will be more difficult to tackle, given its attenuating impact on the Indonesian political and social landscape.

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