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## **The Stabbing of Wiranto: Growing Trend of Knife Attacks**

*By V. Arianti*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The stabbing of Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Political, Law, and Security Wiranto highlights that top Indonesian government officials, especially those in charge of security matters, have long been targeted by the groups that support Islamic State (IS). The incident highlights the continuation of the knife attack trend among terrorists and the militant threat arising from Indonesian pro-IS family units.*

### **COMMENTARY**

ON 10 OCTOBER 2019, the chief security minister Wiranto was attacked while on visit to Pandeglang, Banten, a province located at the Western edge of Java. He was stabbed with a kunai, a Japanese knife, in his stomach by 51-year-old Syahril Alamsyah alias Abu Rara, who is affiliated with the largest pro-IS network in Indonesia, *Jamaah Ansharud Daulah* (JAD).

Seconds later, Abu Rara's wife, 21-year-old Fitri Andriana, stabbed the local police chief who was guarding Wiranto. This incident is unprecedented in the last two decades. Never before had a senior minister been stabbed during a public gathering, and aggravated by a simultaneous attack on the local police chief. What does this mean for Indonesia's security landscape?

### **Top Government Officials Being Targets**

The unprecedented stabbings notwithstanding, high-ranking Indonesian government officials have long been targeted by terrorist groups. They are deemed as representations of *thaghut*, defined as tyrannical entities that refuse to implement *sharia* law and, hence, become legitimate targets for assassination.

Since the declaration of IS in June 2014, President Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi) – along with other high-ranking government officials in charge of security such as Chief of Police Tito Karnavian and former Coordinating Minister for Political, Law, and Security who is now Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Luhut Pandjaitan – have been mentioned as targets for attacks among pro-IS community online.

The knife attack against Wiranto is the first in 19 years where an Indonesian militant succeeded in conducting an assault on a high-level government official in Indonesia. The last successful attack on a prominent figure who was not a minister or security chief was in 2000 when Matori Abdul Djailil was stabbed by a Darul Islam (DI) splinter group. Matori suffered injuries in his head, neck, and hand.

He was Vice Chairman of People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) and Chairman of Muslim-based political party National Awakening Party (PKB) then. A year after, Matori became defence minister.

### **Trend in Knife Attacks & Family Militancy**

The attack against Wiranto is the fourth knife attack in the country in 2019. Last year, there were seven knife attacks. Since IS was declared in June 2014, as many as 24 terrorist attacks involving the use of sharp weapons such as machetes, swords, and knives were recorded. Ten occurred in Central Sulawesi, where pro-IS group Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia or MIT) operates.

The other attacks occurred in Java and Sumatra and were perpetrated by the JAD network as well as other pro-IS cells and individuals. Knife attacks – and beheadings – conducted by MIT have targeted civilians while attacks in other part of Indonesia mainly targeted police officers. The attack against the minister is the first knife attack used against a government high official by the pro-IS cell.

The attack on Wiranto also highlighted another precedent – the first woman involved in a stabbing attack in Indonesia. This is also consistent with the trend where the family unit or a couple forms a militant cell. There are two categories of family/couple cells. The first category is the “established” pro-IS families/couples. Here, both husband and wife would have married prior to their subscription to IS ideology and include Indonesian families/couples who joined IS and willingly migrated to join IS in Syria.

In Indonesia, this was represented by a JAD group in East Java that was led by Khalid Abu Bakar. At least three families and one couple who attended his study sessions had transformed into cells capable of executing attacks. Khalid and the latter couple had previously attempted to travel to Syria to join IS. However, they failed to reach Syria as they were deported by Turkey in 2017.

They then conducted the series of suicide bombings in East Java, Indonesia and Jolo, southern Philippines in May 2018 and January 2019 respectively. Another family cell is that of Asmar Husain alias Abu Hamzah who was based in Sibolga, North Sumatra. He plotted to attack a Sibolga police station together with his wife and children in March 2019.

### **Marrying for Ideology**

The second category is the newly married pro-IS couples made up of pro-IS sympathisers who believe that they can only marry individuals who also subscribe to the IS ideology. The Indonesian pro-IS women – eager to participate in an attack operation – would likely view their marriage as a gateway to conduct operations. Marriage becomes an arrangement that allows their husbands to lead the operation by preparing and providing technical briefings for them.

This was observed when Dian Yulia Novi married Nur Solikin, a protégé of Indonesian IS fighter Bahrin Naim, for the convenience of executing an attack at the Presidential Palace in November 2016. This plot was disrupted by police. Similarly, early this year, two Indonesian women radicals, Roslina (single name) and Yuliati Sri Rahayuningrum, agreed to marry Abu Hamzah (mentioned above) as his second and third wife respectively, again to facilitate the conduct of suicide bombings. The marriage did not take place as they were eventually arrested.

It bears noting that the head of JAD's Bekasi group, Fazri Pahlawan alias Abu Zee Ghuroba, prior to his arrest in 2019, had "officiated" the marriage of four couples; one couple perpetrated the attack on Wiranto while another couple was arrested in September 2019. Two other couples are at large, possibly with militant intent.

### **Moving Forward**

The attack on Wiranto could motivate other pro-IS sleeper cells as it is proven that such crude and simple attacks – especially if it targets high-profile public figures like politicians – can result in the desired publicity and impact. Attacks using sharp weapons have indeed been the preferred modus operandi compared to that of bombings in recent years.

Stabbing attacks continue to pose a serious challenge to security apparatus as they are difficult to detect and prevent, especially now that terror cells made up of couples or family units represent a natural shield of privacy against outsiders hoping to infiltrate.

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