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The Medan Suicide Attack: Enablers of Radicalism

By Unaesah Rahmah

Synopsis

A recent suicide bombing at the police headquarters in Medan, North Sumatra, was the first attack in Indonesia by a pro-IS cell since the death of the so-called "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The radicalisation pathway of the suicide bomber underlines the role of religious study sessions, as against online radicalisation, and kinship influences within the pro-IS circle.

Commentary

THE MEDAN suicide attack in North Sumatra on 13 November 2019 was perpetrated by Rabial Muslim Nasution (RMN) alias Dedek; it killed him and wounded six others, including four police officers and two civilians. Investigations later revealed RMN had regularly attended an exclusive religious study session connected to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), a local pro-IS group.

His wife had also played a key role in radicalising RMN into terrorism. The case illustrates the role of religious study sessions and kinship networks as enablers of participation in terrorist activity in Indonesia.

Religious Study Sessions

Pengajian – both public and closed-door – is a common method in Indonesia to disseminate Islamic teachings. It has been a popular form of gathering for Muslims in their search for religious knowledge. Militant groups, exploiting this platform, organise their own versions of public *pengajian*.

This exposes the community to the former's ideology and, in doing so, identifies potential recruits. *Pengajian* itself is not a source of terrorism, although some extremist groups resort to the *pengajian* approach for recruitment.

The next step – or done concurrently – is organising exclusive study sessions with a few attendees who have shown commitment to the group's ideology. The close-knit study session usually has a physical training (*i'dad*) component as preparation for *hijrah* (migration) or *amaliyah* (operation). An example is the exclusive *pengajian* run by Dita Oeprianto, the mastermind of the Surabaya church bombings in May 2018. He had organised study sessions in his house, attended by three families, including his own, to foster the attendees' commitment to IS ideology that manifested eventually in the attacks. The sessions also acted as a vehicle for Dita to recruit, plan, and coordinate members to make bombs, raise funds, and conduct surveillance for the Surabaya attacks.

Similarly, in the case of the Medan bombing, RMN had attended a regular closed-door *pengajian* in Belawan, Medan, since April 2018. Allegedly led by pro-IS preachers, *pengajian* members comprised at least seven other persons – two couples (including RMN and his wife) and three brothers.

The two cases show that the offline study session remains a typical way to transmit extremist ideology despite the prevalence of online radicalisation among Indonesian radical supporters. Online radicalisation works as an echo-chamber for supporters to find other like-minded individuals.

It could contribute to a person's radicalisation pathway but it will not necessarily lead him to take violent action. Offline religious study sessions remain an essential component for a person to reach the apex of the radicalisation stairway – committing violence.

Kinship: Recruitment and Fostering Commitment

According to Muhammed Hafez, a US-based terrorism expert, recruitment through kinship relations is possible and more natural because the ideological transmission takes place in a non-threatening environment, and the ideas are infused with emotional commitment.

There appears some difference in the pattern of kinship-based indoctrination or recruitment in the IS as opposed to that of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the past. The latter was said to be dominated by men or male superiors within the JI circle. IS cases of recent years highlight the role of women as influencers within the family.

In RMN's case, it was reportedly his wife who introduced him to radical ideology. Nothing much is known at this stage about the wife, but she was reportedly in close contact with radical female inmates in the Medan prison.

She was not the first woman known to have influenced the husband into terror acts. Previously, Anggi Indah Kusuma, who was deported from Hong Kong in April 2017, was believed to have introduced the concept of violent jihad to her husband.

The traditional notion of children being influenced by their parents into radicalism has been matched by cases in which children have been the significant radical influence in the family. The case of Dwi Djoko Wiwoho's family is an example. In 2015, Dwi's younger daughter, Nurshadrina Khaira Dhanita, was the one who played a critical role in convincing him, his wife and her older sister to hijrah to Syria and live under the rule of IS.

Kinship relations is also a way to foster the individual's commitment and courage to abide with the terrorist group. One example is Ummu Shabrina, a woman who left with her family to Syria in 2014. Highly supportive of her husband's role as an IS fighter in Syria, she was very proud when her husband was killed in battle and shared the story of her husband's "martyrdom".

The supportive gesture from a family member can entrap an individual to staunchly believe in the "rightness" of violent jihad, beyond his/her ideological beliefs.

New Regulation on Religious Study Sessions: Limits

The Indonesian government does recognise the problems associated with religious study sessions. The new regulation issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on *Majelis Taklim* (Islamic Religious Study Session) in November 2019 aims to detect and identify *pengajian* that are organised by extremist and terrorist networks.

The regulation requires *pengajian* administrators to register the preachers, members, source of funding, and session venue. They also need to report their activities to the local religious affairs office annually and renew the *pengajian* certificate every five years.

However, the government may face difficulties enforcing this rule effectively as registering religious study sessions does not appear mandatory. The Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs, in response to public backlash against the regulation, indicated that it was "*harus*" (encouraged), rather than "*wajib*" (mandatory).

His response suggests that those who fail to register may not face sanctions. Tightening the regulation further is unlikely given the pushback from society – i.e. perceptions of government interference in the private domain – on this new regulation. This gap in monitoring and control over *pengajian*, therefore, remains an opportunity for radical teachings to continue flourishing.

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