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Indonesia: Perennial Issue of Terrorist Recidivism

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Amidst the worsening COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, concerns over a fresh uptick in terrorist recidivism have emerged. The imminent release of a large number of terrorist offenders from prisons around the country raises the prospect of several returning to a life of militancy.

COMMENTARY

AS COVID-19 continues to blanket countries around the world, Indonesia has faced a surge in coronavirus cases. With the government preoccupied by the burgeoning domestic health crisis, there have been opportunistic calls from local terrorist networks for followers to launch fresh attacks in the country.

The surge in online activity of extremist groups has so far not been matched by a noticeable uptick in plots. Still, a recent incident saw two local ISIS-affiliated terrorists ambush and attempt to kill a member of the Indonesian National Police in broad daylight in Poso, Central Sulawesi.

Two Critical Questions

The 15 April 2020 attack, which resulted in both perpetrators being killed in a shootout with the police, took place only days after the release of an ISIS fatwa. Published in its weekly editorial newsletter, *An-Naba*, the fatwa called on ISIS' followers and sympathisers to launch attacks in the name of the "caliphate" and capitalise on its enemies' preoccupation with the COVID-19 outbreak.

It was subsequently revealed that one of the Poso attackers, Ali, alias Darwin Gobel, had been on the radar of Indonesian law enforcement, having previously been

convicted for planning a terrorist attack in Toli-Toli, Central Sulawesi in 2017. Released after serving a two-year prison term, it appears Ali lapsed back into extremism and reoffended.

Indonesian National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) sources have revealed to this author that Ali had been engaged in deradicalisation programmes, when he was in prison.

His case casts a fresh spotlight on Indonesia's programmes to manage extremists, including prison-based deradicalisation initiatives. It also raises two critical questions: was Ali's re-engagement in terrorism preventable, and to what extent was he inspired by the recent fatwa issued by ISIS?

Such questions are timely, given that Indonesia's deradicalisation programmes -- which involve various agencies, including BNPT and some private sector NGOs -- have had varied results, with recidivism not uncommon. Ali is believed to be one of over 50 recidivists among an estimated 850 terrorists who have been released from prison since 2002.

Vexing Issue

Another vexing issue has been the lack of effective risk assessment and monitoring strategies both within and outside prisons. With at least a hundred terrorist offenders expected to be released from the prison facilities scattered across the country over the next twelve months, this deluge will exacerbate security risks.

Remitted sentences for good behaviour are common in the Indonesian justice system. In this context, some terrorist inmates view participation in the various prison-based deradicalisation programmes as a necessary cost in order to secure an early release; they would appear to be willing participants, while remaining ideologically hardened.

At the other end of the spectrum, more radicalised inmates may perceive such programmes as disadvantageous to them as individuals as well as their wider cause. Such individuals would refuse to be engaged, arguing that as a mujahid (jihadist), it is taboo for them to accept any kind of prison programme from the '*thagut*' (oppressor), in this case, the Indonesian government.

During his incarceration, Ali appeared to be cooperative while participating in the prison-run programmes. However, he continued to be exposed to indoctrination by a senior ISIS inmate. His participation in the recent Poso attack appears to indicate an escalation in his ideological commitment to jihad, compared to 2017, when he was arrested for his peripheral role in planning a terrorist act.

Upon his release from prison in 2019, Ali began, within nine months, to renew his contacts with former social networks actively involved in terrorism. He turned to them apparently after facing rejection and humiliation from mainstream society. He had tried to start a business but it did not work out.

Encouragement for recidivism is also present in extremist media outlets such as *An-Naba*, which provides the inspiration, ideological justifications and praise for all released terrorist inmates by referring to them as *mujahid*.

How to Stop Cycle of Recidivism?

Anecdotally speaking, and based on this author's years of field experience in the domain of terrorist rehabilitation, the first-year post-release is when many terrorist offenders actively find themselves weighing up the costs and benefits of returning to the terrorist fold as opposed to starting life afresh.

Those able to get the right support from their families, friends or local NGOs, tend to stand a better chance of permanently disengaging from militancy and starting afresh.

Yet, the process of cutting oneself off from old social networks is easier said than done. Extremist groups offer "spiritual sanctuaries" for former offenders, making them feel both protected and cared for at the same time. Many can find stepping away a daunting prospect, especially if it means acting 'worldly' (secular) rather than according to their interpretation of their faith.

For Ali, a ready-made radical milieu presented itself in Poso, with the region long considered a traditional recruiting ground for extremist groups, and known for sectarian violence.

Need for Post-Release Monitoring Programmes

Several released terrorists who later lapsed into terrorist activity typically served short sentences (less than five years) – a period that may be insufficient for them to be effectively disengaged and deradicalised.

Going forward, the authorities may want to consider administering longer sentences for terrorist offenders to allow the authorities enough time to set them on the right path, while also serving as a deterrence for other would-be extremists.

Larger investment should also be made in upgrading capacities among BNPT prison staff, such that the daily activities they conduct in the prisons can be scaled up more effectively. Crucially, there must be active detection and prevention of in-prison radicalisation efforts by ISIS 'preachers' and ideologues. Staff also need to be trained to detect early signs of re-radicalisation among inmates.

Post-release, two types of monitoring programmes may be necessary.

The first involves "open monitoring", whereby local government in the respective regions as well as grassroots organisations and NGOs at the community level assist with the social re-integration of former inmates.

In the second relevant authorities must take steps to closely monitor newly released inmates, given their vulnerabilities and possibility of re-joining their old extremist networks within a year of release.

In Indonesia and around the world, terrorist groups such as ISIS will continue to exploit the present restive atmosphere to carry out fresh attacks. Newly-released terrorist offenders present a significant at-risk group for whom a coordinated response from various agencies is required, given their higher propensity for recidivism.

Noor Huda Ismail is a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, and founder of the Institute of International Peace Building in Indonesia.

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