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Female Suicide Bombers: Urgent Deterrence Needed

By Amalina Abdul Nasir

SYNOPSIS

The involvement of female suicide bombers in the August Jolo bombings suggests the steady rise of female combatants in the region. There is an urgent need to address the gaps in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) work in Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

ON 24 AUGUST 2020, a twin bombing attack took place in Jolo, Philippines, taking 14 lives. Both suicide bombers were identified as women, one being an Indonesian wife of the first-ever Filipino suicide bomber from the Abu Sayyaf [Group](#). This attack marks the second female suicide bombing in the Philippines – and the fourth in Southeast Asia.

This could be the beginning of a new trend of female suicide combatants in the region. It presents a new dynamic in militancy, which further suggests that gender-based work in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) has a long way to go.

Female Combatants in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, women have traditionally refrained from shouldering frontline roles in terror networks. They played support roles as mothers or wives, propagandists, recruiters, financiers and logistical providers, and sympathisers.

However, in recent years, female radicals in the region have taken on combat roles as attackers or suicide bombers. This can be traced back to 2016, when Indonesian Dian Yulia Nova, together with her husband, attempted to detonate themselves using a pressure cooker bomb outside the Presidential Palace in Jakarta.

Following this foiled attempt, the Surabaya [bombings](#) in May 2018 became the first attack in Southeast Asia involving female combatants. It was also the region's first successful suicide attack executed by a female radical, and involving immediate family members, including women and children. The second attack involved a family which detonated themselves at a checkpoint at Surabaya police [headquarters](#); only the daughter survived.

In January last year, an Indonesian couple — members of Jemaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) — set themselves off in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Jolo, [Philippines](#).

In May 2019, Malaysian authorities arrested a 51-year-old housewife who was planning to ram a car filled with gas canisters and explosives into a polling station in Puchong, Selangor during the country's general election, according to [The Star](#), quoting an intelligence source.

In October, a couple was arrested after stabbing Indonesia's former chief security [minister](#), Wiranto, with knives and [scissors](#). These cases suggest an increasing trend of female combatants in Southeast Asia, who are flexing their ability to undertake "masculine" roles.

Call to Arms

The push for women to take up arms comes from radical women on encrypted social media and IS propaganda on platforms such as Facebook.

For example, on an Indonesian pro-IS Facebook page, the depiction of a "Mujahidah" (feminine term for mujahid, "one who engages in Jihad") has recently shifted from a female radical carrying a baby, to a group of women armed with semi-automated rifles. This signals the increasing acceptance and encouragement of women taking up frontline roles.

Such propaganda promotes the message to radical women that they are key to the success of their husbands and the ummah (Muslim community) as they have both agency and power in their evolving operational roles.

This is also manifested in online encrypted platforms where some radical women voiced frustration at being sidelined and a strong desire to shoulder more significant roles in IS networks. This desire is seen in postings asserting that women should be "allowed to spill blood" in the cause of [IS](#).

Missing the Mark in Gender Mainstreaming

Groups like IS assert a gender slant in their appeal to mobilise women to their cause. Hence, as the number of female combatants gradually increase, there is a growing need for gendered inputs into PCVE policymaking.

This approach, also known as gender mainstreaming, ensures that the needs and interests of both men and women are taken into account in the policy-making [process](#). It factors in the different needs and conditions of both genders in all stages of

policymaking so that policies benefit not only men but also women, and lead to better outcomes.

This approach calls for security and law enforcement agencies to be more inclusive in their counter-terrorism (CT) [strategies](#). Participation of women in the CT policy process and decision-making can help ensure that women's perspectives and issues related to radicalism and violent extremism are incorporated.

These nuances in formulating and implementing policies are critical to counter IS' propaganda as the motivations of women to take up arms differ from men. A "one size fits all" approach by CT agencies is not the way to go.

Why Regional Gender Mainstreaming is Slow

In Southeast Asia, gender mainstreaming in the CT sphere is still a work in progress. The idea of female representation is taken at face value in some responsible government agencies. For example, in the National Agency for Combating Terrorism (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terrorisme or BNPT) of Indonesia, gender mainstreaming can be strengthened.

Despite having quotas to ensure female representation, female officers fulfill administrative tasks instead of occupying strategic roles to influence [policymaking](#).

Early this year, Malaysia became the first country in the region to appoint its first female counter-terrorism [chief](#). While a significant progress, such appointments should be complemented with more female specialists at the forefront of PCVE content and programmes such as in areas of rehabilitation, reintegration, and community engagement and education.

There are many reasons why gender mainstreaming is making slow progress in the region. Amongst others, it may stem from the ingrained gender stereotypes and the conservative nature of the respective countries. Until this perception changes, it will be a constant challenge to make progress in the greater effort of PCVE.

To clearly address the trend of female combatants, a structured PCVE effort needs to be set in place. Government agencies should set the pace given their abundance of resources and expertise. Governments must also make effort to foster greater inter-agency collaboration.

A structured government approach and authentic government-stakeholder partnerships – in tandem with gender mainstreaming – can prevent more women from falling into the arms of violent radicals.

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