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The Emergence of JI's Political Front

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SYNOPSIS

Two decades since it was first discovered, despite a crackdown by the authorities in the region, JI continues to show its resilience, developing a political arm as a hybrid organisation.

COMMENTARY

THE AUTHORITIES in Indonesia recently arrested Farid Ahmad Okbah, a member of Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) consultative council; he is also the chairman of Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia, PDRI (Indonesian People's Dakwah Party). This move reveals the existence of a newly established JI political front, an addition to its traditional fronts of dakwah (religious outreach) and armed jihad (military struggle).

Also arrested in November was Ahmad Zain An-Najah, a member of the fatwa commission of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), or Indonesia Ulama Council, the nation's top Islamic clerical body. The two men, along with a third man arrested, have been accused of raising funds for JI. Established in 1993, JI aspires to create an Islamic state in Indonesia through its two-pronged strategy of dakwah and armed jihad.

JI's Transformation into a Hybrid Body

Over the last few years, Indonesia's anti-terror police force Detachment 88 has gradually crippled both these fronts, starting with JI's military wing.

Since 2012, JI's military activities ranged from construction of several underground bunkers and the production of home-made weapons, to deploying their members to train and fight with several Syria-based rebel groups (including preparing members' pre-deployment training) as well as planning attacks.

The crackdown on JI's dakwah arm (social activities including charity work) has also intensified since late last year, which included the arrest of some JI clerics.

The arrest of Farid in November, however, confirms some observers' assessment that JI has been transformed into a hybrid militant organisation which now incorporates the political element. How did this come about and what does this mean?

Political Consolidation

Under the leadership of Para Wijayanto, who led JI from 2009 to 2019, JI launched a political component named *tamkin siyasi* (political consolidation) as one of its strategies, as revealed in the court documents of several convicted key JI leaders.

Tamkin siyasi, formalised in 2016, is built from JI's existing social programmes — dakwah and education — and aims to cultivate the sympathy of Indonesian Muslims by winning their hearts and minds.

Tamkin siyasi is part of a larger *strategi tamkin* (tamkin strategy), which emphasises the methodical acquisition and consolidation of influence over territory and to build community support.

The development of JI's *tamkin siyasi* reflects the group's dichotomous and pragmatic stance over time as it attempts to sustain its struggle vis-à-vis its historical anti-democracy position, which it decries as a man-made system.

Engagement With Political Parties

An important component of *tamkin siyasi* is its stance on and engagement with political parties, which is best reflected in three phases. The first phase was prior to 2016, when JI members were banned from taking part in elections, including members not being allowed to vote.

The transition towards JI's encouragement to vote was hinted at in 2015, when JI's senior advisory board member Abu Rusydan stated that the mujahidin (jihadi fighters) should build a relationship with the parliament even though the latter is perceived not to be in line with sharia (Islamic law).

The second phase was from 2016 to 2019, when JI members were urged to refrain from voting for the incumbent President Joko Widodo. Core to this phase was JI's strategy called *istinza'f*, defined as undermining and criticising the Indonesian government.

JI's narrative, as reflected in the public statements of its clerics in social media prior to the 2019 Indonesian elections, urged Muslims to vote for a parliamentary member candidate who could ensure that Muslims' interests were met.

The third phase is marked by JI's attempt to establish, control or infiltrate a political party, exemplified by the involvement of Farid in the PDRI in May 2021.

Preparing for the 2024 Election?

However, with only two provincial branches in Banten and East Java, PDRI will face a significant hurdle to contest in the 2024 general election that requires a new party to have branches in all provinces and 75 per cent of all districts and municipalities.

Whilst starting a new party is easy, Indonesia's regulatory framework for elections and political parties employs entry barriers that make it extremely difficult for new parties to contest in general elections. These will require substantial financial resources, which PDRI seems to be lacking.

What's key, though, is that the PDRI marks JI's transformation towards a hybrid militant organisation, to complement its social and military fronts.

In this regard, the path is modelled after Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Lebanon's Hizbollah — both of which have set up their respective political parties and ventured successfully into local politics.

What Next?

Currently, JI's political path is still very much at the infancy stage. It is important to note that JI continues to exercise the *tandzim sirri* principle, that is, operating as a secret organisation, whereby members do not divulge their association publicly.

This raises the possibility that individuals and parties who have engaged with PDRI and non-JI elements within the party itself might not be aware that Farid is a member of JI's consultative council and personal advisor of JI's leader Para Wijayanto.

At this juncture, there are at least two conflicting scenarios. First, JI may suspend its activities in PDRI. According to JI's counter-intelligence strategy TAS TOS, an abbreviation for *Total Amniah Sistem dan Total Solution* (total security system and total solution), JI's utmost goal is to secure the safety of its members and evade arrest. Pulling out from PDRI may meet this objective.

Secondly, the *tandzim sirri* principle, which protects against the disclosure of JI membership, could allow (unidentified) JI members to continue to act as a pressure group in organised circles.

Putting a Brake on JI

The supporters of Farid, along with other arrested JI clerics, Hanung Al-Hamat and Ahmad Zain An-Najah, have initiated the hashtags #BebaskanUlama (Free the Islamic Scholars) and #BubarkanDensus88 (Dismantle Detachment 88).

JI's track record in shaping public opinion should not be underestimated as it indirectly managed to put pressure on the authorities to investigate the unlawful killing of a JI member Siyono during a police raid in 2016.

Indonesian police's decisive action on JI's newly established political wing, while still at its premature stage, may put the brakes on JI's full transformation into a hybrid militant organisation with its considered entry into Indonesia's politics.

What bears watching is how JI, ever resilient in nature, will recalibrate its holistic strategies, while keeping an eye on its long-term Islamic state aspirations.

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