

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Navigating Pro-JI Pesantrens

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

The issue of radicalisation within pro-JI pesantrens may seem to take place only in Indonesia. However, in the complex geopolitics of the region, a small change in one place can have repercussions on another.

COMMENTARY

EARLY THIS year, Indonesia's National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) revealed that 68 Islamic boarding schools, locally known as '*pesantren*', are affiliated with Jamaah Islamiyah (JI). Will these pro-JI pesantrens advocate a version of Islam that may jeopardise Indonesia's security and social cohesion?

The issue of radicalisation within pro-JI pesantrens may seem to take place in Indonesia. However, in the complex geopolitics of the region in which cross-border inter-linkages are common, a small change in one place can have repercussions in another place. JI founders, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, established JI pesantrens in Ulu Tiram, Johor Baru, Malaysia. Since its discovery 20 years ago, regional governments acted to neutralise it. Nevertheless, JI is a resilient organisation.

Regional Effect of Pro-JI Pesantrens

A recent prison interview by the author with one of JI's returned foreign fighters suggests that JI systematically used its pesantren networks, especially in Central Java, to groom young JI cadres via a "jihad internship" with one of the rebel groups, Jabbah An Nusra (JN) in Syria and Iraq.

Spotting a pesantren as pro-JI, however, is no easy task. For one, pesantrens are the oldest educational institution in Indonesia and are ubiquitous, respected and widely patronised for their public service. Pesantrens have been around since the early days

of the spread of Islam in Indonesia. The ministry of religious affairs estimated that there are almost 30,000 Islamic boarding schools all over Indonesia.

The majority of them are mainstream and of the moderate persuasion. Graduates of these pesantrens are avid supporters of the country's nation-building project such as Abdurrahman Wahid who became a president after the fall of Suharto.

Given this reality, it is impractical and ineffective, not to mention sweeping and unfair, to categorise all of Indonesia's pesantrens as a source of concern. Thus, a rigorous and systematic security assessment on structure, role and operations of pro-JI pesantrens is imperative for three primary security and social interests.

Three Features of Pro-JI Pesantrens

There are three features of pro-JI pesantrens that set them apart.

Firstly, pro-JI pesantrens operate ambiguously. They maintain some degree of obedience to the state, such as registering their foundation, participating in the national curriculum, and attracting donors using legitimate means like collecting alms. This strategy has successfully maintained the longevity of the schools as part of the 'normal' education system.

When the ministry of religious affairs sent its researchers to investigate some of the pro-JI pesantrens' curriculum, they concluded there was "nothing wrong with the school's curriculum".

The researchers missed "signs" of the subtle and systematic radicalisation process outside the formal class setting such as how the school encourages students to sing 'nasyid' (Arabic songs) to promote jihadism during jogging activities.

They also failed to see how radical teachers in the school used some students to participate in demonstrations on the street to support the blasphemy case against the former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok. Students who participated in that event were considered "good" students because they practised "*jihad*". In this context, the teacher served as a role model for students.

High Social Standing

Secondly, in a country where religion and religious issues are important, people with religious credentials such as those who graduated from pro-JI pesantrens receive high social standing. They are often invited to give religious sermons in events such as celebrating the '*hijrah*' (migration) of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina or other Islamic occasions. Indeed, majority of them do not agree with acts of terror in Indonesia.

However, their teaching of "*Al Wala wal Bara*" (loyalty and disloyalty) serves as a very strong foundation for their followers to consider other people outside their group as 'lower class' or 'less worthy' in terms of commitment to the faith. It means they embrace the idea of being special.

The above "exclusivist" view of Islam has social ramifications that could endanger Indonesia's social cohesion through intolerance of different understanding and practices of Islam, such as those of the Shias, and discouraging mingling between the opposite sex even for non-Muslims.

The graduates of pro-JI pesantrens have also the privilege to shape the dominant religious discourse in the society with many tools, such as publishing books that are widely circulated beyond Indonesia. One of the Malaysian ISIS supporters, Muhammad Wannady, was selling a book called "*Tarbiyah Jihadiyah*" (Educating Jihad) by Abdullah Azzam that was published by a pro-JI publishing company in Central Java.

Product and Producer of History?

Lastly, pro-JI pesantrens have hijacked the narrative of "Islamic revivalism". This narrative gives a sense of re-enactment of the past where good triumphed over evil, framing victory as inevitable. Therefore, it can also be interpreted that pro-JI pesantrens are both the product and the producer of history.

The product of history means that the narratives of pro-JI pesantrens related to "Islamic revivalism" serve as a "template" of reference that can be extracted and employed for recruitment purposes. While it is a movement that has been around since the collapse of the Ottoman empire in 1924, pro-JI pesantrens are constantly innovating on this narrative by tapping on historical grievances of Muslims worldwide.

As the producer of history, they are promoting the wrong interpretation of Islam. Meanwhile, other practices of Islam in history are very different from what has been understood by graduates of pro-JI pesantrens.

To mitigate the spread of twisted interpretations, efforts should be made to embark on social interventions. There are at least three ways: First, address material grievances before a downward spiral sets in, where the core meaning in life is sought and found in a religious narrative; Second, promote the narrative of inclusive and moderate Islam; and third, make learning materials easily accessible and digestible to the public.

Noor Huda Ismail is a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is the co-founder of an international award-winning community website www.ruangobrol.id.
