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The Challenge from Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia

By Raneeta Mutiara

SYNOPSIS

Disbanded by an official decree issued by President Joko Widodo in 2017, the hard-line Muslim movement, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia remains a political and security challenge for the Indonesian authorities, and they need to adopt the most salient approach in dealing with its popularity. The key is the diverse background of the movement's supporters in Indonesian society.

COMMENTARY

Among various Islamic puritanism movements in Indonesia, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) is the one currently gaining traction. Its popularity is due to its ability to place itself in between conforming with Indonesian democracy centred on the national ideology of Pancasila and upholding the movement's vision of an Islamic State of Indonesia. HTI is also able to capitalise on its extensive involvement in Indonesian politics before the disbandment by the Indonesian President in 2017. Furthermore, the number of cases involving violence as a result of HTI activism, has historically been negligible in comparison with other hard-line movements such as the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam), the Anti-Shia Movement and the Salafi-Wahhabism faction.

Origin of HTI

HTI has been part of international politics ever since its founding in the Middle East in 1953. Hizbut Tahrir emerged at the time when nationalists there needed support in their fight against Western colonialism. Hizbut Tahrir entered Indonesia in the 1980s when KH Abdullah bin Nuh, then leader of Al-Ghazali Islamic school in Bogor, West Java, invited Abdurrahman Al-Baghdadi, a Hizbut Tahrir activist from Australia, to form and base his grouping in Indonesia.

During Soeharto's "New Order" government, the size and presence of HTI and other social movements was tempered because of the authoritarian nature of the regime. The fall of Soeharto in 1998, which ushered in the "Reformation Era", provided opportunities for the growth of social movements, democracy, and freedom of speech. Since then, the HTI has been part of Indonesian politics.

As an Islamist group, HTI does have specific aims and objectives for the future of Indonesian politics. This is why it was adamant about obtaining legal status for itself unlike many other religious movements in Indonesia that are happy to exist without official endorsement. The legal status of HTI allowed it to penetrate not only the religious, but also the political, economic, and social spheres of Indonesian society. From religious schools to members of political parties, and from healthcare to financial institutions, HTI's ubiquitous yet subtle influences are found in many aspects of Indonesian life.

Reactions to the Disbandment of HTI

HTI's disbandment in 2017 generated controversial debates in society. Several think tanks believed that the measure was too harsh, considering that HTI was not violent in nature even if it was exclusive in its advocacy and membership. On the other hand, the government had accused the organisation of having crossed a political red line. Apparently, HTI's involvement in the prosecution of Basuki Widjaja (Ahok), then Governor of Jakarta, for religious blasphemy, was a turning point, whence the movement came to be perceived as being politically extreme.

The abrupt revocation of HTI's legal permit was opposed by a significant number of people in the group as they believed that Ahok's prosecution was justifiable. They thought that the government's reaction was unfair as there were no proper dialogues for reconciliation. They also perceived the ban as a hasty decision arising from a panic response to the perceived threat of Islamist movements to Indonesian democracy and Pancasila.

HTI's Presence in Society

The disbandment of HTI does not mean that the movement has been eradicated. A few months back, an armed woman identified by the National Counter Terrorism Agency of Indonesia (BNPT) as a HTI supporter with radical and anti-regime ideology, attempted to trespass into the presidential palace. There was also the case of Hanan Attaki, an Acehese-born religious preacher with radical views, who was rumoured to be closely associated with HTI and its ideology, although he has denied the accusation.

On the political level, the public discussion on HTI revolves around its engagement with two strong candidates for the 2024 presidential election, i.e., Anies Baswedan and Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto, which was regarded as an effort by the banned group to pursue re-empowerment. The above instances illustrate the pertinence this movement has to the social and political dynamics of the country, which is why its role in present-day Indonesia is still being investigated.

Without a legalised organisation to represent them, most HTI followers have become

hostile towards the government. They are to be found across the archipelago and are still very active, with many penetrating and subverting segments of Indonesian society at the ground level. Unlike their predecessors who conformed to Pancasila in return for government recognition, the current HTI leadership is politically alienated. Many HTI followers feel discriminated against, if not abandoned, by those in positions of power and influence.

Prior to the 2017 ban, HTI used to receive government funding regularly. Without funding since the ban, it has become challenging for the group to sustain its activities. The disbandment of HTI has also caused thousands of its members to lose employment owing to the collapse of HTI-affiliated organisations and workplace prejudice. The fact that followers of the HTI movement hold grievances against the incumbent government makes them vulnerable to radical ideas and prone to violence.

Conclusion

Given the continued popularity of HTI, the Indonesian government may need to revisit the action taken against it so as to placate its followers and re-integrate them back into the mainstream. In doing this, understanding the heterogeneity of the group is of paramount importance as HTI followers come from diverse backgrounds. Factions are to be found within the group, as indicated by the different levels of inclination towards HTI values and ideologies. It is not uncommon for HTI followers to dispute narratives or to hold ideological debates among themselves. Applying a one-rule-for-all by treating HTI as a homogeneous entity may widen the division with adverse consequences for the nation.

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