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Repatriation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration: The Need for a Unified Policy Approach

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Southeast Asian policymakers must adopt a nuanced and comprehensive approach in dealing with the repatriation of their citizens affiliated with terrorism. This approach calls for policies that recognise the individual needs of the returnees, ensures their rehabilitation and fosters their reintegration into society. This analysis, which is based on case studies in Indonesia, emphasises the imperative for united action, and urges policymakers to craft comprehensive responses that enhance the prospects for rehabilitation and reintegration.

COMMENTARY

As the impending December 2023 repatriation nears, Indonesian citizens linked with terrorism prepare to return from Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Turkey. However, their rehabilitation and reintegration into society is not a straightforward process. Neither is it infallible.

A 14-year-old, previously rehabilitated at Sentra Handayani – a rehabilitation centre under Indonesia's Ministry of Social Affairs – is a case in point. The youth later succumbed to familial influences and re-engaged in terrorist activities in the Philippines. This case underscores the urgent need for a sustained, strategic and policy-driven approach to rehabilitation programmes at Sentra Handayani. A nuanced approach is needed – one that includes the victims' perspectives when family members are themselves terrorists.

The story of the 14-year-old is emblematic of the delicate balance required between security imperatives and human rights considerations. While the imperative for security measures is evident, the rehabilitation process should not merely focus on

punitive measures but also address the psychological and emotional needs of the victims.

The intricate process of receiving returnees necessitates a nuanced orchestration between relevant institutions and ministries, predominantly steered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and BNPT, Indonesia's National Terrorism Agency. Sentra Handayani itself faces capacity constraints, underscoring the urgent need for relevant government agencies to contribute facilities and resources to the centre.

To meet the challenges in the repatriation process, comprehensive policies must be enacted. These policies should go beyond the needs of security to address the psychological and emotional needs of the returnees. They should provide a structured framework to handle them besides taking into account their individual circumstances.

Challenges in Repatriation

Sentra Handayani, governed by its internal standards, grapples with capacity constraints. Handling 263 clients associated with terrorism from 2016 to October 2023, the centre also encounters the challenge of accommodating entire families.

The complexities of the repatriation process were painfully experienced in the case of a family returning from Turkey. With 14 members spanning generations, their association with terrorism began during their time in Turkey. Sentra Handayani became their refuge, although its resources were limited. The absence of standard operating procedures (SOPs) obstructs collaboration with other centres across regions, necessitating a concerted effort from various entities involved.

This case encapsulates the challenges inherent in a secure and comprehensive repatriation process, urging a meticulously designed policy response. A policy-driven framework is imperative to address these structural challenges. The rehabilitation process must extend beyond punitive measures and encompass a holistic approach. Policies should be formulated to address the specific needs of individuals and families and ensure that they receive the necessary support for psychological healing and societal reintegration.

Policymakers need to strike a delicate balance between security imperatives and humanitarian considerations. Crafting policies that would ensure the safety of the nation while effectively rehabilitating returnees is crucial. The absence of a structured approach could exacerbate the strain on institutions like Sentra Handayani, compromise the effectiveness of the repatriation process and impact national security.

Within Sentra Handayani's narratives lies tales of triumph over adversity. Some children born in an Iraqi prison, living with their mother serving a 15-year sentence, found a path to redemption through Sentra Handayani. Repatriated and rehabilitated over four months, they overcame initial language barriers and successfully integrated into Indonesian society.

This story underscores the transformative potential of comprehensive rehabilitation programmes, emphasising the need for systematic policy support. Policymakers

should therefore ensure that policies go beyond punitive measures to address the individual needs of those returning from conflict zones.

Challenges in Reintegration

The post-rehabilitation stage accentuates Sentra Handayani's limitations in monitoring its clients and emphasises the criticality of local government involvement to avoid reintegration failures. The problem arises when families refuse to accept rehabilitated individuals, or have an environment supportive of continuing terrorist engagement, necessitating reliance on referral institutions as a last resort. A robust policy framework is essential to guide and bolster this critical phase of the process.

Reintegration, like rehabilitation, is a multifaceted process that demands sustained support mechanisms. Policymakers should devise comprehensive policies that empower local governments, engage communities, and offer ongoing support to individuals post-rehabilitation. The reluctance of families to accept rehabilitated individuals, or seeking their return to participation in terrorist activities, highlights the societal challenges that policymakers must address. Clear guidelines and support structures are imperative to ensure that reintegration policies strike a balance between individual redemption and societal acceptance.

The year 2017 marked a pivotal moment for Sentra Handayani, which was tasked with the rehabilitation of 100 returnees from Turkey. Within this cohort was a 7-year-old child whose trajectory, despite initial integration, regrettably led back to terrorist activities in the Philippines due to the continued influence of parents involved in terrorism. This unfortunate case highlights the fragility of the reintegration process, particularly concerning children associated with terrorism. It underscores the indispensable role of local governments in ensuring sustained monitoring and support post-rehabilitation.

The involvement of children necessitates a nuanced and child-centric approach in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. It demands a strategic policy response that addresses their unique needs and vulnerabilities. Balancing security imperatives with the imperative to provide these children with a chance at a normal life is a delicate yet crucial aspect of a comprehensive policy framework.

Conclusion

This imperative for united action extends beyond traditional policy domains and merges into the broader landscape of regional security concerns. The 2020 Jolo church bombing in Sulu, Philippines, exemplifies the far-reaching consequences of inadequate repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration measures. The family involved had been deported from Indonesia, eventually traveling to southern Philippines to carry out suicide attacks under the banner of the Islamic State.

This highlights the possibility of regional security implications and underscores the need for a meticulous policy roadmap that addresses the multifaceted challenges of repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The narratives and challenges presented in this analysis should serve as a guiding framework for policymakers navigating the complex terrain.

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