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Countering Terrorism in Indonesia

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SYNOPSIS

Terrorist activities in Indonesia experienced a decline in 2023 while the number of terrorist suspects detained was 142 compared with 248 in the previous year. While important to acknowledge the achievements of counterterrorism efforts in the country, it is necessary to recalibrate the focus and to identify areas requiring improvements so as to further enhance the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures.

COMMENTARY

At a press conference held in the Criminal Investigation Agency of the Indonesian National Police (POLRI) headquarters in Jakarta on 20 December 2023, the Counterterrorism Special Detachment 88, also known as Densus 88, announced that 142 terrorist suspects were detained in 2023. Of these, 50 belonged to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), 29 to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), 7 to Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS), and 5 to Darul Islam (DI).

Densus 88 also announced that 16 detainees were undergoing a preliminary assessment, 101 were under investigation, while 23 have completed the investigation process and are being transferred to the Prosecutor's Office. Two of the terrorist suspects had died during efforts to arrest them.

Propaganda and materials promoting terrorism and violent extremism were disseminated through offline and online workshops by the extremist groups. Some of these groups were also involved in terrorism financing using cryptocurrencies in the name of humanitarian foundations. They have also manipulated charity and socio-

education themes and leveraged social media in raising funds. The proceeds were usually used to finance overseas trips in support of international jihadist organisations.

Densus 88 has also identified five JI- and JAS-affiliated foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) among the 142 terrorist suspects detained. These returning individuals had flown to Syria and Yemen to join the paramilitary jihad programme of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), where they were trained to make weapons and to conduct military operations.

Overall, in 2023, the number of terrorism cases in Indonesia had decreased by almost half of that in the previous year, reflecting the commendable preventive and anticipatory measures taken against terrorism. This highlights two points in the country's current Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) measures: Firstly, the effectiveness of ground operations by Densus 88 in preventing terror attacks, and secondly, the efficacy of the National Counter Terrorism Agency's (BNPT) deradicalisation programmes as demonstrated by the drop in the recidivism rate.

Recommendations for Countering Terrorism

Despite speculations that Indonesian militant groups presently do not have adequate capacity to perpetuate terrorist acts and that terrorist networks have stagnated due to the weakening of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, it is crucial for the authorities to maintain a high level of vigilance. As important as it is to maintain the focus of dismantling terrorist groups such as JI and JAD, Densus 88 and BNPT must not overlook the transborder terrorist organisations that have the potential and magnitude to carry out attacks. These groups have also proven their ability to abuse cyberspace to expand networks, solicit funding, and supply weaponry.

POLRI recently acknowledged the protracted threat posed by external radical ideology infiltrating Indonesian society, particularly through social media. Adding to this problem, ISIS supporters in Indonesia are still very active, and given their access to weapons, poses a grave threat to the nation's security.

As acts of terrorism are often tied to significant events, the upcoming 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election must be given priority in surveillance and prevention. This is important given that 49 of the 142 terrorism suspects have been identified as members of the Abu Oemar group, a multi-affiliated terrorist group which plans to disrupt the election across various provinces in Java.

In addition, both Densus 88 and BNPT should operate in collaboration instead of independently in pursuit of their respective objectives. This will help to remove the distrust in the counterterrorism bodies the public had developed in recent years, as lack of trust complicates the effectiveness of the CVE programme, especially in the initiatives that involve community engagement.

The CVE agencies in Indonesia should also move towards gender-based, as opposed to gender-neutral measures, given that women are radicalised differently and according to factors distinct from men. The progress of female deradicalisation has not met expectations yet, and the role of female religious leaders and officials in this process is limited.

Four women were among the 142 terrorist suspects detained last year. Although the number seems low, there is the possibility that other female extremists have not been identified by the authorities. There is a common perception that women in Indonesia are unlikely to engage in terrorism, hence leading to the underestimation of women's involvement in terrorism.

Democracy, Patriotism and Radicalisation

Noting the threat that terrorism poses to the security and stability of the country, the governor of East Java, Nana Sudjana, recently highlighted the unequal distribution of democratic and patriotic sentiments among Indonesian citizens. He urged the government to propagate *Pancasila*, the legal governing ideology of Indonesia, to the society at large, as it embodies the foundational democratic principles of the nation.

However, considering the tumultuous trajectory of Indonesian terrorism, a question worth pondering over is whether democracy and patriotism embodied by *Pancasila* are enough to prevent violent extremism from penetrating Indonesian society. Why are these two noble principles insufficient to prevent a segment of Indonesians from engaging with radical ideologies?

While democracy is a cornerstone of Indonesian governance emphasising political participation and representation, it has not effectively addressed underlying socio-economic grievances, religious tensions, or feelings of marginalisation that contribute to radicalisation. Patriotism is also a strong force for national unity, but it may not be sufficient to counter radicalism. Extremist groups often exploit issues related to identity, religious beliefs, and perceived injustices to create a narrative that appeals to individuals who may feel excluded from society or whose sense of belonging to the country is absent.

While democracy and patriotism are important factors in preventing violent extremism, they should be supplemented by other tangible public policies to mitigate radicalisation, including the inculcation of critical thinking and digital literacy in schools and universities. Addressing economic disparity and ensuring inclusive development are vital in deterring people from subscribing to radical ideologies in order to escape from their unfavourable circumstances.

Lastly, the Indonesian government and CVE agencies should foster open dialogue among communities and religious leaders to build trust, dispel misinformation, and counter extremist narratives. Employing such a holistic approach will strengthen the roles of CVE agencies in Indonesia and reinforce their CVE efforts across the nation.

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