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## **Indonesia's Presidential Debate: Questioning the Future of Counterterrorism**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*During the third Indonesian presidential debate, the three candidates made only a few remarks about terrorism threats. The limited discussion was understandable because terrorism has not necessarily been the focal point of Indonesia's defence and security for the past few years. But should the country be complacent about the current situation?*

### **COMMENTARY**

At the third Indonesian presidential debate on 7 January, the three presidential hopefuls – Anies Baswedan, Ganjar Pranowo and Prabowo Subianto – debated a wide range of international issues, including the South China Sea conflict, defence, security and foreign policy. However, the question of dealing with terrorist threats drew minimal discussion in the debate.

Anies remarked that terrorism is a tangible threat, and that Indonesia should thus focus on combatting such threats instead of making massive purchases of armaments. As his statement was an intended jab at Minister of Defence Prabowo Subianto and his arms ambitions, the topic of terrorism went largely unaddressed. Ganjar did make passing mentions to Indonesia's achievement in combatting terrorism in 2023. He noted that there had been no prominent terror attacks recently and applauded the Indonesian National Police (POLRI) for their efforts. Prabowo echoed Ganjar's statement, applauding the success of POLRI and the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) in handling complex terrorism issues, including the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings and

terrorist attacks in Poso. Nevertheless, neither delved very deeply into the issue of counterterrorism for the rest of the debate.



A special unit of the Indonesian National Police (POLRI), the Mobile Brigade Corps (BRIMOB), secures the crash site of a TNI AD helicopter in Poso Pesisir, Central Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, during Operation Tinombala (now known as Operation Madago Raya) in 2016, which aimed to combat the Indonesian terrorist group, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

While these are indeed remarkable achievements for Indonesia, the country is not immune to terrorist threats. According to POLRI's annual [year-end press release](#), 142 terrorist suspects were arrested in 2023. This indicates that Indonesia should remain vigilant.

### **Shifting Priorities?**

On matters of defence and security, the bulk of the debate instead focused on modernisation plans and cyber security. Anies and Ganjar also grilled Prabowo's track record as defence minister, such as the controversial procurement strategy, food estate programme, and the slow progress of the Minimum Essential Force. Based on the debate, it appears that counterterrorism is not a top priority for all three candidates.

As defence minister, Prabowo does not have ambitions for counterterrorism, unlike his predecessor, Ryamizard Ryacudu. The former minister frequently emphasised counterterrorism in his speech and policies, including the establishment of the intelligence-sharing initiative "[Our Eyes](#)" in ASEAN and the "[Bela Negara](#)" (Defend The State) programme," a semi-military training to instilling patriotism and nationalism.

After Prabowo assumed his position as defence minister in 2019, several terrorist attacks ensued. To mitigate these terrorism threats, the House of Representatives ratified the revised law on terrorism, Law No. 5/2018, during Jokowi's first term. Under this law, the police could act swiftly against suspects and carry out preventive arrests against individuals who have pledged allegiance to banned terrorist organisations even though no terror attacks had been plotted yet.

An unfinished task of Jokowi's administration is regulating the deployment of TNI in counterterrorism operations. Scholars and civil society activists warn that the absence

of rules of engagement will lead to overlapping responsibilities and expand the scope of TNI's role to domestic security. Jokowi's administration should have issued the regulation a year after the revised law was ratified but disagreements over the draft have prolonged the formulation process.

Although discussions on *Peraturan Presiden* (PERPRES, or presidential decree) were absent in the debate, Ganjar asserted his commitment to eliminate overlapping responsibilities and to uphold law enforcement in Indonesia. He stated that TNI will only be involved in counterterrorism operations if the threats are beyond the police's capabilities. It is indeed a normative statement, but it will reassure the police that counterterrorism will remain under their authority if he is elected. Ironically, in Indonesia, catering to the interests of the security apparatus is important for leaders to assure their regime's survival.

In a similar vein, Prabowo also asserted that, if he is elected, the police will remain under the direct command of the president. This arrangement has always been problematic because the president could politicise the police, exploiting them to fight against opposing individuals or groups. Likewise, it will hinder police reform because the promotional system will be based on personal relationship with the president instead of merits.

### **The Missing Points**

Though the limited debate time hindered comprehensive discussions on terrorism, the newly elected president will still have to consider the National Action Plan (NAP) for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), which was issued by Jokowi's administration in 2021 and is set to expire in 2024. Will the new president renew or terminate it?

The NAP emphasises the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach in implementing P/CVE programmes. The NAP aims to enhance coordination between relevant stakeholders and empowers the regional government to execute P/CVE programmes. One of these initiatives is the creation of an integrated database platform called Indonesia Knowledge Hub ([I-KHUB](#)) for relevant stakeholders. Besides I-KHUB, there is also an initiative by civil society organisations (CSOs) called Knowledge Hub ([K-HUB](#)), run by Peace Generation. K-HUB has released a [mapping](#) of CSOs' P/CVE initiatives that helps the country to address specific pillars of the NAP in vulnerable areas. These platforms aspire to support various stakeholders in creating a comprehensive database of government and non-government programmes.

The NAP also aims to enhance the engagement of regional governments in P/CVE initiatives. Both government and non-government agencies have been assisting regional governments in creating their own Regional Action Plan for P/CVE. However, its progress varies by area as execution heavily depends on the priorities of local stakeholders and regional governments. Progress tends to be slow when local stakeholders do not see imminent threats in their regions or do not want to be labelled as a "hotbed of terrorism". Regions that have been more cooperative in the process are Central Java and West Java.

Three years is a very short time to accomplish the NAP's agenda across the country. Some programmes are still either in the identification or preparation stage. However, there are also concerns from counterterrorism experts that engaging all government institutions in P/CVE programmes would only force some institutions to carry out P/CVE programmes even though they have limited knowledge on the issue, leading to [suboptimal outcome](#). Terminating the NAP may not be a wise decision either, as it is still valuable to coordinate P/CVE initiatives in Indonesia. The next president should carefully assess its progress and identify necessary actions to augment its impact.

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