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No. 173/2010 dated 17 December 2010

Counter Ideology: Battle for Hearts and Minds in Indonesia

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Synopsis

Fighting contemporary terrorism in Indonesia is a protracted effort that needs strategies aimed at not just short term results, but also long term effectiveness. This means protecting the future generations of Indonesia from the terrorists' ideology.

Commentary

INDONESIA'S HARD approach in dismantling the physical capability of terrorist groups in the country has had quite an impact. Since the latest Jakarta twin bombing that hit the country in July 2009, a training camp in Aceh has been destroyed. Also, members of terrorist groups Jemaah Islamiyah and Lintas Tandzim have been arrested. These include spiritual leaders Aman Abdurrahman, Abdullah Sonata, Muhammad Jibriel and Abu Bakar Bashir – with Bashir just recently charged with multiple counts of terrorism. Also, there were some who were killed resisting arrest, including prominent and high profile personalities Noordin M Top and Dulmatin.

The problem of terrorism, however, is far from over. Reactions of the online Indonesian extremist community on this hard approach show that the “kill and capture” strategy could be fuelling the extremist ideology, aggravating a sense of victimisation, and spurring the extremist community to continue its ‘perceived’ struggle. More importantly, the problem highlights the urgency for a more holistic strategy that should emphasise also the soft approaches essential to tackling terrorism in Indonesia.

Online Indonesian Extremist Community's Reactions

The online Indonesian extremist community comprises both participants and administrators of online sites that show support, in Bahasa Indonesia, for terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah, as well as spiritual leaders who glorify terrorists such as Abu Bakar Bashir. Through the lenses of this online community, news of the arrests and killings as reported in the mainstream media are seen from a different angle. They take such incidents and operations as opportunities to strengthen their perceived grievances and promote their motivations. Though there is no one unanimous narration or description of the actual situation, shared negative sentiments towards the Detachment 88 – Indonesia's anti-terrorism unit -- and aggravated sense of victimisation resonate throughout the extremist online sites.

For example, the individuals arrested and killed are perceived differently by the online extremists. Some insist that they are the ‘mujahideen’ who were indeed involved in planning attacks against the Indonesian government for a purpose supposed to be a religious one.

On the other hand, there are some who believe in their innocence and interpret the clampdown on individuals such as Muhammad Jibriel as an act of repression against Islam. Whatever the interpretation, the angst towards the Indonesian government is magnified. Simultaneously, the ideology of defence through armed means is propelled vis-à-vis an intensified belief that one's group identity is being repressed. These views are portrayed through the postings of news updates of a reckless 'thoghut' (Apostate) Detachment 88 killing and arresting suspected terrorists without evidence, and messages from leaders such as Abdullah Sonata calling out to "...alumni of the holy warriors to unite against Detachment 88".

Online Fundraising

Online sites related to Jemaah Islamiyah and extremist supporters of the group have been observed collecting funds for the families of affected terrorists since the detention of Putri Munawaroh in 2009. Munawaroh was sentenced to three years imprisonment for harbouring terrorists, Noordin M Top and her husband, Susilo in September 2009. This online fundraising continues until today through several cyber sites, from the more prominent forums, to individual blogs that assist in disseminating the information on ways to donate. These online efforts have reaped reasonable success. Recent observations show at least US\$2000 given to families of arrested and killed terrorists, including the wife of Mu'arifin, Naim Muniarti.

This has been easily detected as the amount of money collected and presented to families is constantly updated online. This tactic helps build trust between donors and fundraisers. Advertisements on fundraising efforts persuade readers by leading them to believe that they are on the 'path of righteousness', using noble-sounding headlines such as "Cleanse your possessions through the families of the holy warriors". The formation of RUMPUT (Rumah Putih or White House) Foundation which aims to raise money through business ventures to help the so-called affected families of terrorists has also been reported online.

Online Uncertainties

Online observations alone, however, are not sufficient to capture real perceptions as well as the ideological development of Indonesian Islamist extremists on the ground. The fact remains that we can never really know the identities of individuals in cyberspace. Also, there is no statistical evidence revealing a deteriorating image of Detachment 88 and worsening perceptions of victimisation in the eyes of the Indonesian extremists. In fact, from a psychological standpoint, one may argue that such online expression of frustration may be more of a conduit to vent anger. Also, the credibility of the success of the fundraising, and the use of the Internet as the only means and platform for fundraising, remains questionable.

These uncertainties however cannot rule out the full significance of online observations. Online postings are known to be closely related to offline reality. Past book fairs and gatherings of support for the Arrahmah Media Company affiliated to Jemaah Islamiyah used the Internet as one of their tools of recruitment. Also, although perceptions expressed online (hatred for Detachment 88) cannot be concretised as genuine ones, one cannot rule out the possibility of such expressions being the factor that could trigger such sentiments offline. Online observations are a gold mine of information. This should not trigger paranoia, but prepare us for necessary preemptive measures.

What Should be Done

In the light of the online observations, terrorism in Indonesia will possibly continue through the personal ties between terrorist groups and families of their affected comrades. Families of terrorists groups are especially vulnerable to the extremist ideology because of, firstly, personal grievances towards the Detachment 88, and, secondly, relations with terrorist groups who assisted them in their time of need.

Fighting this contemporary terrorism in Indonesia is a protracted effort that needs strategies aimed at not just short-term results, but also long term effectiveness. Because it is a phenomenon very much intertwined with ideology justified by perceived grievances, Indonesia has to remember the importance of winning the hearts and minds of three target audience: the terrorists, their families, and also the public at large.

While rehabilitation for the terrorists and counter ideological efforts have been emphasised, Indonesia must also incorporate comprehensive care programmes for the family members of terrorists in its counter terrorism strategy. Such programmes should provide counseling and financial aid to assist the families into leading a healthy social life in sync with the mainstream Muslim community in Indonesia. This will help cut off the terrorists' links and influence from the future generation of Indonesians.