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Decoding Indonesia's Radical Islamists: What to de-radicalise?

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Synopsis

Even though Indonesia has a long history of Islamist radicalisation, the counter-terrorism measures since the first Bali bombings in October 2002 have not completely averted the threat. The terrorist attacks in Sumatra in 2010 are evidence of this continuing challenge.

Commentary

COUNTER-TERRORISM involves a plethora of tasks encompassing operational strikes against armed terrorists, de-radicalisation and rehabilitation. While no one faith has a monopoly of politically-motivated violence, for some, radical Islamism has emerged as the major challenge to most Muslim and non-Muslim states.

While no consensus exists on how to define terrorism, radicalism, de-radicalisation and rehabilitation, the existence of the threat is undisputed. Since 2002, the more than 600 arrests and 50 deaths of the Jemaah Islamiyah and affiliated members in Indonesia alone testify to its ability to generate insecurity. Islamist terrorism's rejuvenation was again demonstrated when more than 120 armed militants surfaced in north Sumatra from February 2010, targeting the police, now labelled as thoghut -- enemies that could be killed.

What to Deradicalise?

Indonesia has responded with multiples counter-measures to meet the threat. This is premised on the principle that while Indonesia has to be lucky all the time in pre-empting terrorist strikes, the terrorists just need to be lucky once to harm society, the government's image and its political will. The recent establishment of the National Anti-Terrorism Agency reflects the government's resolve to address this priority. De-radicalisation is the new agency's major goal which aims to persuade the radicals to abandon the use of violence followed by a change in the radicals' mindset.

While many states have complemented hard counter-terrorism measures with soft ones, the key issue is -- what is there to de-radicalise? The answer lies in what has been radicalised. Radicalisation is the transformation of an individual's behavioural and cognitive outlook in terms of extremist thinking, sentiments and actions. In turn, de-radicalisation involves the abandoning of radical ideology, de-legitimising the utility of violence and a willingness to co-exist in a pluralistic milieu. The term counter-radicalisation is often preferred as this targets not just those who are exposed to radical ideas but also to pre-empt those who are yet to be contaminated by them.

Due to a host of factors, Indonesia continues to witness an upsurge of religious radicalism. Some salient characteristics, the DNA of radicalism so to speak, stand out when one analyses the attitudes and behaviour of jihadists.

DNA of the Jihadist

The jihadist embodies the following characteristics:

- a literalist approach towards religion with religious teachings being interpreted strictly based on the written word. The Arabs refer to this as *zahiriah* in command, meaning the supreme importance of the written word;
- a romantic importance attached to religion, with the unseen past viewed as good tradition and the ideal type that should be re-created;
- holds the view that there should be no new interpretation or *ijtihad* of what has been stated in the Holy Quran. The opposition to new 'tafsir' or exegesis is based on the notion that the Quranic text is all-supreme and sacred, relevant for all times, and the context in which it is being practised is irrelevant. In short, the text always overrides the realm of practice;
- believes in 'kebenaran mutlak' or the unconditional absolute truth, with any other view treated as heretical. A believer of such 'wrong' views can be classified as an apostate or *murtad*, and labelled as a traitor to the religion;
- practises exclusivity, where working with adherents of other religions (*kafirs* or *infidels*) is considered *haram* or forbidden. Many Islamist hardliners will not even cooperate with Muslims who do not share their views, viewing them as *jahiliyyahs* (ignorant) or worst still, as *kafir harbi* (enemy *infidels*), which traditionally only described non-believers operating in a conflict zone, and how Muslims should relate with them;

Labelling those who disagree with the radical discourse as enemies has intensified conflicts among Muslims, exacerbated intolerance and widened the scope for violence within a state, especially in a Muslim majority one, best evident in the recent attacks on the *Ahmadiyah* sect in Java;

- sees justification in the use of violent jihad to realise their beliefs. Radical Islamists believe that violence carried out for religious causes is legitimate, with a jihadist achieving the ultimate goal of *shahid* or martyrdom by dying for a religious cause. Increasingly, 'lesser' jihad or violent jihad is preferred rather than greater jihad, which is for personal fulfilment. Increasingly too, the term *qital*, or armed struggle, is used. For radicals, whether the jihad is 'far', 'near', 'offensive' or 'defensive' is irrelevant as *qital* is deployed against Islam's enemies;
- adopts Islamist radical ideology in political discourse. All issues are described purely in religious idioms with Muslims' persecution as the common theme;
- virulently opposed to westernisation and democracy, as these are viewed as un-Islamic;
- resists liberalism, pluralism and secularism as being antithetical to Islam;
- is Sharia-minded, and aims to create a *Darul Islam* (Abode of Islam) as a prerequisite to *Darul Salam* (Abode of Peace), where Islamic law or Sharia would determine the rules of society.

Jihadi Salafist

Indonesian radical ideologues such as Abu Bakar Baa'syir and Aman Abdurrahman, essentially of the jihadi salafist persuasion, have been influencing dogmas and practices at various levels of society. This is leading to the Arabisation of Indonesian Islam, in opposition to the traditional practice of *Islam Pribumi* or indigenous Islam. Fissures are threatening to emerge between those championing Arabisasi Islam and Pribumisasi Islam, especially in Java, as Islam is more about religion while Arabisation is cultural in orientation.

Reversing, through counter-ideological measures, the political and theological discourses of the extremists would go a long way in undermining their aim of promoting radical thought in Indonesia's body politic. The aim is to encourage the extremists to abandon violence and adopt a more moderate mindset.

If violence is abandoned only on tactical grounds, as long as the violence-prone ideology survives, it will remain a threat to democratic societies as violence is inherent in such ideologies. As such, if Indonesia fails in its de-radicalisation efforts, it could result in greater insecurity in Indonesia and the Southeast Asian region.

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