



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg) or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 012/2013 dated 23 January 2013

## **Terrorism Threat in Indonesia: Key Concerns in 2013**

By Bilveer Singh

### **Synopsis**

*Despite a slew of counter-measures after the terrorist bombings in Bali in 2002, the threat of terrorism continues to loom. Developments in 2013 are likely to worsen the security situation in Indonesia.*

### **Commentary**

SINCE THE 2002 terrorist bombing in Bali by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Indonesia has done much to counter the threat of violent terrorism by Islamist militants. Densus 88, the elite police counter-terrorism unit, has been at the forefront neutralising JI, killing or capturing most of its members.

As of December 2012, more than 820 terrorists have been captured and 80 killed. Yet, this has not terminated the threat nor deterred them. While no major attacks have taken place since 2009, more than 110 militants were captured following the discovery of a major terrorist training camp in Aceh in 2010.

### **Emergence of new groups**

Indonesia's inability to halt the threat was evident in the series of attacks in 2012 following which 11 terrorists were killed and 17 captured with 28 members of the police force killed. Poso in Sulawesi and Solo in Central Java are the main theatres of terrorist operations. In the first week of 2013, seven terrorists were killed and 10 captured.

Complicating the picture is the emergence of new and splintered groups sworn to avenge the killing of their comrades, besides stopping perceived Christianisation of the country and aiming to build an Islamic state. Behind the veil of democracy, radical preachers continue to spread their ideology of hate and murder. The terrorists' targets have shifted from attacking the 'far enemy' (the West), to the 'near enemy', that is locals, especially the police.

Many of the new terrorists are youngsters, indicating their recruitment for the cause. There is also the rise of 'soft violence' where radical adherents oppose mainstream political, economic, social-cultural and religious practices, and developing cells of like-minded hardliners bent on wreaking havoc on society when instructed to do so.

## Seven grounds for concern in 2013

Why does the terrorism landscape not exude much optimism this year? There are seven areas of concern for the year ahead.

*BNPT's leadership vacuum:* Since the first Bali bombing, top counter-terrorist (CT) officials have anchored Indonesia's efforts to neutralise the terrorist threat through the BNPT, the national counter-terrorism agency. Highly competent officers such as Gories Mere, Ansyaaad Mbai, Tito Karnavian and others were responsible for the near total elimination of the JI in Indonesia. The threat of terrorism in Indonesia today is a post-JI phenomenon. By 2013, most of these top CT officers would have been retired or deployed elsewhere, weakening the leadership of Indonesia's CT capability. How successfully Indonesia fills the void remains to be seen.

*Release of more than 300 convicted terrorists:* More than 300 of the 830 convicted and imprisoned terrorists are due for release in 2013 and 2014 on completion of their sentences. With more than one third of Indonesia's imprisoned terrorists set to be free, there is grave danger of many re-integrating or developing new groups to exacerbate the terrorist threat in Indonesia. As there is also a high rate of recidivism, this is a cause for concern if hardened and newly networked terrorists are available for recruitment.

*Continued emergence of new terrorist groups:* The post-JI terrorist scene is more complex, populated by mainly small, diffused and home-grown cells that are difficult to detect. The vacuum left by JI has been filled by new, unknown groups, competing to champion Indonesia's Islamist causes. Violence has also increased against Shias, Ahmadiyahs, Christians and perceived enemies of Islam. The rise of groups such as the Sunni Movement for Indonesian Society (HASMI) that plotted to bomb the US Embassy in September 2012, reflects this trend. These 'new faces' are below the intelligence radar screen, surfacing only when it is too late to counter them.

*Weak counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation efforts:* While Indonesia has one of the best counter-terrorism processes in place, its track record in counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation is quite the opposite. While much has been said about what needs to be done in this area, not much has actually been carried out since the first Bali bombing and not much more can be expected in the near future. Radicalism, spurred by religious misconceptions, has remained an aspect of the national terrain with radical preachers peddling messages of hate and violence, in turn, transforming many ideological radicals into operational ones. Many relatives of captured and killed terrorists are also being recruited, partly for revenge.

*National Political Distractions:* As 2014 is the year of the general and presidential elections, the country's politicians will concentrate their energies on winning political power. There are also many local elections. With Indonesia being 90 percent Muslim, there is no appetite to launch major counter-terrorist operations. This stems from the fear of alienating the Muslim vote bank which can be accentuated by radical narratives that this is nothing more than an anti-Islam exercise undertaken at the behest of the West. Counter-terrorism, it is argued, is aimed at weakening, exploiting and dominating Indonesia.

*Poor Governance:* The overthrow of Suharto's 32-year long New Order and the introduction of reformasi and democracy has not improved the lot of the populace. Corruption at the highest levels of the government has become endemic, leading to the general disenchantment with the largely secular-oriented political parties and politicians. The moral decay and erosion of legitimacy have led many to propose an 'Egyptian-type' solution by voting Islamists into power even as the terrorists, through violence, try to push for a transformation of Indonesia into an Islamic state.

*International Developments:* Indonesia has always been permeable to external influences. The Arab Spring, the perceived anti-Islamism and double standards of the West, and brutal Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, especially in Gaza, have been critical vectors for radicalisation. The 'buying into' of the radical discourse has been facilitated by anti-Islam policies of many Western governments, especially the US and Israel, with many Indonesians believing that these are deliberate measures to humiliate Islam and Muslims. This has also radicalised many Indonesians into supporting violent extremism.

With the central government's political leaders concentrating on the upcoming elections, the BNPT weakened by a leadership vacuum, the terrorists' potential strengthening of their ranks by the impending release of hardened cadres into a domestic setting that is conducive to radicalisation, Indonesia has to brace itself for greater insecurity in 2013.

*Bilveer Singh is an Adjunct Senior Fellow with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) of, the S.*

*Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore.*