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The Dissolution of Jemaah Islamiyah: Genuine Change or Tactical Switch?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

The announcement on 30 June 2024 by senior Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah leaders of their decision to dissolve the organisation should be regarded with caution because they may only be switching tactics while maintaining their overall strategic objectives in Indonesia and the region.

COMMENTARY

The announcement on 30 June 2024 by senior Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leaders of the decision to dissolve the organisation has certainly captured international attention. On that date, sixteen senior JI members announced the dissolution of the Al-Qaeda-linked organisation and that they would “return to the fold of the Republic of Indonesia and were ready to abide by its [laws](#)”.

The currently incarcerated former JI leader, Abu Rusdan, also declared that the JI leadership would ensure that “the curriculum and teaching materials in JI-affiliated religious schools will be free from [extremism](#)”. Besides Abu Rusdan, also present at the occasion was Para Wijayanto, who had led JI for a decade from 2009 till his arrest in 2019 for terrorism-related recruitment and fund-raising activities. A video of the occasion was later broadcast on the hardline JI YouTube channel [Arrahmah.com](#) to lend further credibility to the announcement.

In its heyday in the 1990s and 2000s, JI was a potent transnational terror network based in Indonesia but with cells throughout maritime Southeast Asia and even Australia. Seeking to create a pan-Southeast Asian caliphate through the use of force, JI was behind several high-profile attacks, such as the October 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people.

However, following a strong Indonesian security response with regional and international collaboration, JI suffered many losses in manpower and resources, prompting a switch by the 2010s to a [“long-game” strategy](#). With eyes on its Indonesian base, JI has since focused on discreetly rebuilding its resources and popular support through *dakwah* (preaching) and clandestine infiltration of civil society and government [agencies](#).

What, then, can we make of the latest announcement? There are two possibilities.

Scenario One: JI’s Dissolution is Genuine

First, the announcement may be seen as a strategic victory for Indonesian and regional counter-terrorism efforts over the past two decades. After all, Islamist threat networks have laid down arms before.

Take the case of the Gamaa Islamiya (GI) or Islamic Group in Egypt. Between 1993 and 1999, GI, which had sought to create an Islamic State in Egypt through violence, carried out numerous attacks on government and security officials, Coptic Christians and tourists. It perpetrated the notorious Luxor attack of 1997 that killed 58 tourists.

Strong action by the Egyptian government resulted in the arrest of many GI leaders. The militant group declared a ceasefire by 1999, and by 2002, its incarcerated leaders declared that their use of violence was misguided and further renounced its future use. The following year, the Egyptian government released hundreds of former GI members from [prison](#).

Perhaps Indonesian JI leaders are on a similar trajectory. After more than 30 years of armed struggle, they have seen the light, so to speak. It is known that some JI leaders have acknowledged for years that “if establishing an Islamic state were the goal, above-ground organisations like the Islamic Defenders Front had made more progress than [JI](#)”. It is thus no surprise that very senior JI leaders like Abu Rusdan and Para Wijayanto appear to be publicly backing the new posture of being “ready to be actively involved in realising Independence so that the Indonesian nation becomes a developed and dignified [nation](#)”.

Whether the senior leadership of JI is sincere or not, the key concern now, as observers have noted, is from disgruntled lower-ranking JI members who disagree with the new approach. They may break off to form violent splinter groups or join other existing threat groups like the pro-ISIS Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), which has been engaged in violence in Indonesia in recent [years](#). It is worth noting that the splintering of threat groups is very common in Southeast Asia; JI itself splintered from the older Java-based Darul Islam separatist movement in the 1990s.

Scenario Two: JI Has Merely Switched to Enhanced *Taqiyya* Mode

The alternative view is that the threat of violent splinters is probably not the most crucial issue. Instead, the JI announcement should not be taken at face value. This is because of the concept of *taqiyya*, a classical Islamic warfare doctrine that permits dissembling if one is under the authority of the [infidel](#).

In this scenario, JI leaders see themselves as only switching tactics but keeping the end goal of establishing a hardline version of an Islamic State in Indonesia and even the region alive. Doing so would make strategic sense, given that recent arrests have heavily depleted JI of its leadership and membership. Announcing the official disbandment of the organisation would result in JI “members and associates” ceasing to be targets of [arrest](#). This would enable JI to reconstitute itself quietly under another name or names.

Scenario Two cannot be readily dismissed. Seemingly absent thus far is compelling evidence, at least in the public domain, of formal repudiation by senior JI leaders of its strategic doctrines, as captured in its 1996 operational manual, PUPJI (*The General Guidelines of Struggle*). Since 2009, JI has engaged in a low-signature campaign called *strategi tamkin* in response to an inclement operational environment and taking a leaf from PUPJI.

This entailed a general cessation of violent actions and a focus on gradually gaining political and societal influence through *dakwah* (proselytisation) and education. *Strategi tamkin* has been implemented by JI operatives through the principle of *tamkin siyasi*, or the active penetration of political and societal organisations, via clandestine means under the guiding precept of *tandzim sirri*, or the deliberate concealment of JI links – the very essence of a *taqiyya* mindset.

It has been estimated that between 2010 and May 2022, at least 19 civil servants, eight police officers and five military officials were arrested for their JI connections, which they had hitherto successfully kept [hidden](#). This slow-burn, overall *strategi tamkin* approach would only have been enhanced by the JI disbandment announcement. Why look for hidden JI links if JI has ceased to exist?

By the same token, one should take JI’s promise to reform the curriculum of its extensive network of religious schools with a pinch of salt. The issue is not the formal curriculum of these schools but rather the general, informal, hidden curriculum and culture shaped by certain influential teachers and personalities that foster the exclusionary religious mindset that fuels JI’s extremist [ideology](#).

Implications

If Scenario Two is correct, then relevant authorities should remain wary. JI’s below-radar implementation of its insidious agenda through clandestine infiltration of political, religious and social institutions would continue with an even less pronounced signature. For instance, JI cadres could join key religious groups and Islam-based parties to shape Indonesian Islam in more extreme ways.

This has already happened. In November 2021, Farid Ahmad Okbah, chairman of the little-known Indonesian People’s Dakwah Party (Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia [PDRI]) and Ahmad Zain An-Najah, a member of the *Fatwa* Commission of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), the nation’s top official Islamic clerical body, were arrested.

It was discovered that Farid was also a member of JI’s consultative council and a personal advisor to Para Wijayanto, while Ahmad Zain was a board member of a JI-

linked charitable [foundation](#). From now on, there would be no observable institutional JI links even to be detected.

It is also worth remembering that senior JI leaders like Abu Rusdan and Para Wijayanto will be completing their prison terms in the next few [years](#). Hence, “the increasing involvement in public life of the men who signed the Jun 30 [statement](#)” will become a reality. If these men are indeed in *taqiyya mode*, as they join and gradually usurp the agendas of religious, social and political entities, their impact over time on Indonesian Islam and the wider region could well prove detrimental.

Hence, relevant Indonesian religious and governmental authorities should consider insisting that JI leaders publicly and formally repudiate PUPJI, while renouncing the use of *taqiyya* and associated methodologies. In Egypt more than 20 years ago, incarcerated GI leaders did something similar, publishing books that explained to their rank and file and the public, GI’s “extensive refutation” of their “earlier interpretation of [jihad](#)”.

If JI leaders want the region to believe that Scenario One is the case, they should have little issue taking these additional important symbolic yet substantive steps. After all, given the mayhem JI has caused regionally over the past two decades, this is a justifiable demand. The price of peace, as it has been said, is eternal vigilance.

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