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Pondering the Future of Indonesia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy under Prabowo

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SYNOPSIS

Chaula R Anindya argues that declining terrorism trends in Indonesia over the past few years is the result of two decades of efforts by all relevant stakeholders in counter-terrorism. An important question emerges: Will counter-terrorism remain a critical issue for the new president, Prabowo Subianto?

COMMENTARY

The collapse of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the outbreak of COVID-19 greatly affected the landscape of international terrorism. ISIS could no longer lure aspiring jihadists to emigrate to Syria. With limited resources and restricted movement, the pandemic created a vacuum in the recruitment pool. In Indonesia, after the ratification of Law No. 5/2018 on terrorism, the security apparatus is empowered to carry out preventive arrests. This measure has curbed the number of terrorist attacks. In 2023 and 2024, Indonesia recorded zero terrorist attacks. The number of arrested terrorists also significantly declined. In 2018, the police arrested 396 terrorist suspects. The large number was due to a series of terrorist attacks in early 2018. In 2023 and 2024, the police arrested only 196 terrorist suspects.

The Disbandment of JI and Budget Cuts

Another remarkable moment was the disbandment of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). At the end of June 2024, key figures in JI declared the disbandment of the group and pledged to be loyal to the Republic of Indonesia. Following a massive crackdown after the arrest of its leader, Para Wijayanto, in 2019, senior JI members held a series of discussions among them and with the police special counter-terrorism unit, Detachment 88. The senior members agreed that violent jihad is no longer relevant and the Indonesian government is not the enemy of Islam. Nonetheless, a [pragmatic](#)

[view](#) also led to such decisions. If JI continues its operation as an organisation, the police will continue chasing down its members and assets, including its boarding schools (*pesantren*). There is a fear that a splinter group will pose a new challenge. It might happen, but the senior members of JI sought to minimise such risks. They have been reaching out to members at the grassroots level to explain their decisions to disband.

Many wonder about the fate of JI members after disbandment. At the end of 2024, Yusril Ihza Mahendra, the Coordinating Minister of Law, Human Rights, Immigration, and Correctional Services, announced the government is considering granting pardons to JI members. Yusril asserted he had received the list of JI names, and will assess whether they are eligible to request a pardon from the president. This initiative can be seen as the government's reconciliatory gestures to support the reintegration of JI members into the society. However, it can also be seen as an attempt at "cost-efficiency". In January 2025, Prabowo's administration announced a budget cut for several governmental agencies. The Ministry of Immigration and Correctional Service and the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) are severely affected by the budget cut. The massive crackdown arguably put additional burden on the government. From 2019 to 2021, for instance, the police arrested 212 JI members. Granting pardons and early release for some JI members would allow the government to reduce the cost of managing terrorist inmates.



The decline in terrorist activities in Indonesia is the result of two decades of enhanced counter-terrorism capabilities, strengthened laws, and other preventive measures. Will counter-terrorism efforts continue to be a priority? *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Pondering Prabowo's Decisions on Repatriation

The repatriation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) from Syrian camps is expected to be addressed under the new administration. In 2020, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo stated that the country will not repatriate FTFs except for children under 10 years of age. Despite the Jokowi administration's stance in refusing the return of FTFs, the United States persuaded Indonesia to repatriate those in the camps. According to Indonesian government officials, whom the author spoke to, the United States contacted various governmental agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

BNPT, to offer assistance in repatriating those in the camps. Nonetheless, the two agencies affirmed Jokowi's stance to not repatriate all FTFs in the camps.

Before the end of Jokowi's administration, the government had prepared a repatriation plan, comprising three phases; before the border, at the border, and after the border. These phases comprise data verification, threats assessment, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. This plan is expected to be carried out under the new administration. Although [many analysts](#) are positive about the plan, the overall implementation remains a challenge.

Indonesia is now more familiar after experiencing a "trial and error" process in 2017–2018 in handling deportees. At that time, social shelters belonged to the Ministry of Social Affairs, with Sentra Handayani and the Protection House and Trauma Center (RPTC) serving as rehabilitation centres for the deportees. Their main duty is to handle juveniles and victims of violence, respectively. Due to their lack of knowledge about terrorism, civil society organisations and governmental agencies offered training for social workers in the shelters. They also assisted the shelters in creating standard operating procedures for handling radicalised individuals. Will they be able to handle an influx of returnees? The shortage of human resources and psychological burden might pose challenges because social workers need to handle juveniles, victims of violence, and returnees at the same time. Sentra Handayani is likely to become a preferable shelter for women and children returnees, while RPTC is an alternative for adults without children. However, the government may need to strengthen the security in RPTC. From the author's past visit to RPTC, the facility's security system will need to be significantly improved.

Another challenge is the reintegration programmes. Governmental agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) are experienced, but the sustainability of the programmes is a major challenge. The programme from Jakarta-based agencies often lasted only a few months. Indonesia has acknowledged the importance of engaging the regional governments. Yet, the response depends on the views of each regional leader; some do not consider it a priority, leading to bureaucratic hurdles in implementing the programmes.

Concluding Thoughts

Will repatriation become Prabowo's priority policy? The repatriation will cost a lot. When he served as a defence minister, Prabowo barely mentioned the issue of terrorism, unlike his predecessor, Ryamizard Ryacudu. Instead, he focused on the defence modernisation plan. The Ministry of Defence is not affected by the recent budget cut, indicating his commitment to continue his ambitious modernisation plan. The police is also not affected by the budget cut, but counter-terrorism is not necessarily a priority. There have been complaints about the low incentives for those dealing with counter-terrorism despite high-risk tasks. It remains a question whether Prabowo will allocate available funds for large-scale repatriation. In addition, with the recent massive budget cut, a repatriation plan may also trigger another debate among the public, scrutinising the government's decision about prioritising the terrorists instead of the greater good of the public. A government official claimed that Jokowi's past decision not to repatriate FTFs was based on the government's survey of public sentiment. There is a fear of potential radicalisation in the country. Others might

scrutinise by asking, “Should I be a terrorist to receive special treatment to find jobs?” An option is to carry out the repatriation “silently” to avoid resistance and ease the reintegration of returnees. It will not be an easy task.

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