



Between Emotion and Reason: The Reintegration of Former Jemaah Islamiyah Members

Noor Huda Ismail



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Between Emotion and Reason: The Reintegration of Former Jemaah Islamiyah Members

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

The imminent release of Abu Rusydan from prison introduces a pivotal dynamic in Indonesia's reintegration of former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members. His charismatic authority contrasts sharply with that of the last emir of JI, Para Wijayanto's rationalist leadership, highlighting that sustainable reintegration requires balancing emotional loyalty with structured rehabilitation, both for Indonesia and across Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

The release of Abu Rusydan – former emir of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) and successor to co-founder Abdullah Sungkar – from Semarang Prison next month is more than the release of an individual. He represents a symbolic figure whose presence resonates across pesantrens (Muslim religious schools), grassroots networks, and former jihadist cadres.

Having spent years in Afghanistan, Abu Rusydan embodies what Max Weber describes as “charismatic-traditional authority” – a legitimacy grounded not in formal titles or bureaucratic appointments, but in battlefield experience, religious scholarship, and personal prestige.

His formal training in communication and social sciences further amplifies his ability to articulate emotionally compelling narratives, connecting with followers in ways no structured programme can replicate.

Para Wijayanto, JI's last emir, presents a sharp contrast. Trained in engineering, he embodies rational-legal authority, applying logic, strategy, and structural rigour to the reintegration process. Through his foundation, *Rumah Wasathiyah*, he has

established programmes offering vocational training, education on religious moderation, and systematic rehabilitation.

Para's initiatives reflect careful planning and organisational acumen but often lack the emotional resonance that Abu Rusydan commands. While rational arguments appeal to the mind, they do not automatically capture loyalty or the trust that comes from years of shared struggle.

Adding complexity to this dynamic is their familial tie: Abu Rusydan's son is married to Para's daughter. This kinship could facilitate cooperation, allowing the former's charisma and the latter's rational strategy to complement each other. But it also has the potential to generate tension.

Abu Rusydan's emotional authority may overshadow the carefully structured programmes of Para Wijayanto if personal dynamics interfere. Their differing educational backgrounds – social sciences versus engineering, respectively – introduced layers of divergence: one excels at mobilising loyalty and sentiment, the other at systematising operations.

The effectiveness of JI's reintegration may hinge on whether these two strands can be reconciled.

Between Emotion and Reason

The reintegration of former JI members is a complex interplay of emotional loyalty and rational programming. Veterans of Afghanistan, the Moro conflict, and Syria carry profound attachments to Abu Rusydan's narratives of jihad, sacrifice, and brotherhood. Para Wijayanto's rationalist arguments about organisational disbandment, legal compliance, or vocational programmes rarely resonate when confronted with these deeply ingrained bonds.

Abu Rusydan's release is poised to amplify the emotional dimension, potentially challenging the reach of Para Wijayanto's structured initiatives. As one senior ex-JI member told author, "The reintegration of JI will be influenced by two things – emotion and reason. Abu Rusydan embodies the emotional, Para the rational."

Younger cadres who participated in Syria's so-called "jihad internships" with groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham bring home stories of struggle and hardship, reinforcing the charismatic authority of figures like Abu Rusydan. For these returnees, rationalist programmes alone are insufficient; they require spaces where emotional needs are acknowledged, and experiences validated.

Reintegration, therefore, cannot rely solely on seminars or bureaucratic frameworks. It demands coordinated efforts across multiple sectors – security, education, religious affairs, and social services – designed to engage both the mind and the heart. Emotional engagement is not a superficial add-on; it is a crucial determinant of whether former cadres will accept rehabilitation and reintegration or drift toward nostalgia-fueled radical networks.

Leadership Styles and Their Implications

Leadership profoundly shapes organisational resilience in times of transition. Abu Rusydan's charismatic-traditional authority inspires loyalty, preserves symbolic legitimacy, and fosters cohesion, even among those who have left active militancy.

Para Wijayanto's rational-legal authority emphasises efficiency, accountability, and professionalised operations, offering a clear pathway for structured reintegration. Both leadership styles are essential, yet their coexistence introduces friction.

When harmonised, charisma and rationality can reinforce each other. Charisma can enhance the credibility and reach of structured programmes, while rational frameworks ensure accountability and prevent the drift into nostalgia. Mismanagement, however, risks fragmentation: networks could divide between nostalgic loyalists drawn to Abu Rusydan and pragmatic reformists aligned with Para Wijayanto.

Historical analogies are instructive. The Taliban combined Mullah Omar's charismatic authority with later technocratic governance, while Hamas balanced emotional appeals to resistance with structured administration. For JI, Abu Rusydan's charisma offers an opportunity to strengthen reintegration programmes if carefully channelled to complement, rather than compete with, rationalist initiatives.

The Role of Grassroots Influence

Abu Rusydan's influence is most pronounced at the grassroots level. His presence at *tabligh* gatherings (held for the purpose of preaching and reviving faith among Muslims), pesantren events, and community forums draws large audiences, validating emotional attachment to JI's legacy. The narratives he conveys – sacrifice, brotherhood, and honour – retain symbolic and psychological weight among former cadres.

On the other hand, Para Wijayanto's rationalist approach, while methodical and effective in creating disciplined structures, often struggles to generate the same emotional resonance. *Rumah Wasathiyah* – a new initiative aimed at guiding former JI members away from extremism – despite its merits, has occasionally been perceived as detached or overly bureaucratic. Nevertheless, it is a critical initiative, offering vocational training, religious moderation courses, and rehabilitation programmes, and must continue to be supported. Adjustments to strengthen emotional engagement could enhance its effectiveness, bridging the divide between structured programming and heartfelt transformation.

Examples from other contexts highlight the power of emotion in successful reintegration. At Pesantren Nurul Iman Pesawaran in Lampung, leaders reformed curricula and embraced religious moderation not due to external pressure, but through internal, emotionally driven motivation.

This self-directed, organic transformation carries legitimacy and sustainability that top-down interventions often lack. Indonesia's post-JI reintegration must similarly

combine emotional engagement with structured initiatives to ensure both efficacy and credibility.

Policy Implications

Reintegration programmes cannot rely solely on rational persuasion. Workshops, curricula, or vocational programmes must provide platforms where former members can channel emotional energy into socially constructive activities, including community service, education, entrepreneurship, or humanitarian work. Framing civic engagement as a legitimate avenue for “struggling against injustice” can redirect past loyalty into productive societal contributions.

Social-psychological research emphasises the importance of emotional engagement in shaping pro-social behaviour and reducing recidivism among former combatants and extremists. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) similarly highlights that sustainable reintegration requires addressing psychosocial needs alongside practical skills and education.

Neglecting emotional dimensions risks nostalgia overwhelming rationalist programmes, potentially fuelling splinter groups or overseas networks. Conversely, harmonising emotion and reason offers a model for disengagement that can extend beyond Indonesia to Southeast Asia’s jihadist networks. The coexistence of Abu Rusydan and Para Wijayanto presents both risks and opportunities: charisma must reinforce, not undermine, structured rehabilitation.

Jl’s ideological diaspora – stretching from Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines to the Middle East – continues to take cues from developments in Indonesia. Mismanaged reintegration could reignite networks abroad, while effective adaptation could serve as a blueprint for regional disengagement. Abu Rusydan’s return is a double-edged sword: a risk if left unmanaged, a resource if carefully aligned with structured programmes.

Yet a critical risk remains: if charisma eclipses rationality, nostalgia may re-legitimise Jl’s legacy and weaken structured programmes. Worse still, if charisma and rationality should work together for mobilisation rather than rehabilitation, the outcome could be destabilising, as was the case with the Taliban, which paired Mullah Omar’s charisma with technocratic governance, or with Hamas, which combined emotional appeals with bureaucratic structures to sustain legitimacy. Policy must therefore not only balance but actively align emotional authority with rational frameworks so that charisma reinforces, rather than undermines, reintegration.

Conclusion: Bridging Emotion and Reason

The disbandment of Jl in June 2024 did not mark the end of its story. Its legacy persists in the hearts and minds of former members. Sustainable reintegration depends on harmonising Para Wijayanto’s rational-legal authority with Abu Rusydan’s charismatic-traditional authority. Rational structures provide accountability and order; emotional resonance inspires loyalty and engagement.

With Abu Rusydan's imminent release, Indonesia faces a pivotal moment. Reintegration efforts must simultaneously engage minds and hearts, ensuring that JI's past becomes history rather than a blueprint for future militancy. By bridging the divide between emotion and reason, policymakers can turn symbolic authority into productive societal reintegration, safeguarding national and regional stability.

Noor Huda Ismail is a Visiting Fellow at RSIS and a strategic communication consultant for Southeast Asia with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). He also runs the award-winning interactive community website, www.ruangobrol.id.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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