

INDONESIA: UNDERSTANDING THE TERRORIST MOVEMENT

The bombing of three churches in Indonesia's Surabaya on 13 May 2018 took the world by surprise. Yet terrorism is nothing new in this South East Asian country of 260 million people, home to the world's largest Muslim population. This article aims to give a brief overview of the dynamics of radical Islamic activity in the archipelago which fuelled the recent bombings.

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WHERE DOES TERRORISM IN INDONESIA COME FROM?

Terrorism is a by-product of Islamic fundamentalism. Though debatable in definition, many identify Islamic Fundamentalism with the sentiment of anti-modernist, anti-secular, anti-democratic, anti-globalization, anti-Semitic, anti-emancipation, anti-feminist, and anti-plural. Some also equate the term fundamentalism with the desire to spread Islamic teachings and create a pan Islamic state also known as caliphates all across the globe. No wonder it has been considered the biggest threat in the contemporary global security, including in Indonesia.

Research by the International Crisis Group (ICG) stated that the rise of Salafism in Indonesia is by no means alien to the local context of Islam. The presence of puritanism, the sentiment against Christianity, and the use of violence in achieving an Islamic state has been part of the long history of Indonesia. However, the global rise of Islamic puritanism, along with massive Saudi funding in its expansion, enabled it to blossom in the 1980s and 1990s, to burst out at the end of the Soeharto regime and to spread and grow during the following reformation era.¹

¹ President Soeharto was in office from 1966 to 1998. The post-Suharto era has been a period of transition, an era known in Indonesia as Reformasi (English: Reform).

INDONESIA HAD BEEN A CHAMPION OF MODERATE ISLAM FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT CHANGED THIS?

ICG highlighted a strong consultation relationship between Indonesia's Sheikh and the Arab clerical leaders as one of strongest indicator of such connection. That connection, it said, has shifted the moderate nature of Islamic culture among the majority of Indonesian Muslims.

Since then, Indonesia has witnessed the lethal violence carried out by radical Muslims against the minority, including Christians. Though the Christians are not the only ones persecuted in the name of faith in this country, the threatened position of Christians is still alarming.

The forms of violence range from terrorist attacks to mass-mobilized violence. On Christmas Eve in 2000, for instance, a series of church bombings took place in Jakarta, Pekanbaru, Medan, Bandung, Batam Island, Mojokerto, Mataram, and Sukabumi. The bombings killed 18 people and injured many others. The most recent attacks took place on 13 May 2018 when a family of suicide bombers set off explosives at three churches in Surabaya, killing at least 14 and injuring over 40 others.

WHY ARE CHRISTIANS TARGETED BY RADICAL ISLAMIC GROUPS?

Firstly, there is fear of Christianization. Before the country's independence in 1945, the increasing number of conversions to Christianity triggered insecurity amongst some Islamic puritans. The seed of such ideas can be found in the teachings of Ahmad Dahlan, the founding father of Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic group in Indonesia.²

During former president Soeharto's era (1966 to 1998), the anti-Christian spirit remained embedded in Indonesia and is reflected in political tension between the Muslims and Christians driven by Christianization issue. Muslim political leaders from Muhammadiyah background were concerned about various missionary activities across Indonesia and once again asked the government to set a limit on Christian missionary activities.

Mujiburrahman (2006) recorded how feelings about Christianization and the fear of Christianity continued to become a major issue among Islamic communities in the Soeharto era. The sentiment appeared both at the political and grassroots levels. In the beginning of the Soeharto regime, some churches were vandalized and burnt in Jakarta by the Muslims, saying that the churches were built in

² Dahlan pursued his Islamic knowledge in Mecca, Saudi Arabia under the Salafi Ulama at that time. The influence of Wahhabi puritanism in Saudi Arabia motivated Ahmad Dahlan to reform Islamic practices in Indonesia. One of his main concerns was the missionary activity in Java Island which thus lead to the birth of Muhammadiyah.

Muslim majority areas. A governmental instruction was thus issued to discourage Christians from building churches in Muslim majority areas.

In 1999, as Soeharto's regime collapsed, a small fight in Christian-predominant Ambon sparked a large-scale inter-religious communal warfare. By July 2000 it was estimated that 9,000 people had died and approximately 700,000 had been made homeless, and hundreds of mosques and churches had been destroyed. Indonesia saw widespread formation of radical groups. In 2000, ICG highlighted a serious shift in the way Islamists fought the Christians. Several publications were written by famous jihadist leaders such as Hambali and Mukhlas, the masterminds of Bali bombing linked to al-Qaeda's network in Southeast Asia, *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI).

In short, the desire to establish an Islamic state had always existed since the nation's birth, but for decades, Soeharto's authoritarian rule was able to repress the Islamists' struggles. His sudden absence starting in 1999 was almost immediately followed a mass awakening of terrorist movement in the country.

Secondly, in the words of an Islamologist, *jihadists* see the world in a constant state of war. True peace will only be achieved when Islam reigns, called *darul Islam* or house of Islam. People of other religious groups, or of different interpretations of Islam, are seen as an obstacle from achieving their definition of peace and thus must be eradicated.

Lastly, a widespread perception persists among the radical Islamic groups that Christianity is a religion introduced by Western countries. The latter are strongly and negatively associated with colonization (Indonesia was a Dutch colony for 350 years), the Crusades, and capitalism or neo-imperialism.

WHAT DOES *JIHAD* LOOK LIKE IN INDONESIA?

According to ICG, there are two forms of jihadi groups in Indonesia. The first is the *jihad tanzim* (organized jihad) which believes that organized and structured movement is needed to achieve a greater goal. Meanwhile, there is also *jihad fardiyah* (individual jihad) which is conducted by those who believe that war becomes an individual obligation for all Muslims. No leader or organization is necessary: Children can wage war without their parents' permission, wives without their husbands'. The second form of jihad, also known as 'lone wolf attack', has become the subject of many terrorism and radicalism studies.

Using cell group method, jihadi groups have increased in number all across Indonesia. Most of the smaller groups run their operation not by doing massive bombings such as the Bali Bombing incident. They are using *ightiyalat*, or secret assassinations, by targeting Muslim officials who are deemed as oppressors [*thaghut*] as well as prominent non-Muslims or infidels [*kafir*] where Christians and members of the Ahmadiyah sects are included in the target list.

The way they recruit followers varies. Some follow strictly closed recruitment, while others are open to outsiders. Jaringan Islamiyah (Islamic Network), for instance, recruits only selected people after a long indoctrination process. Usually, it will take a year or longer until someone can pass the various stages of study. Those selected come from various backgrounds, mostly from the family circle or the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) circle.

Research conducted by East West Center entitled *Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet* revealed how internet has been widely used by the radical groups, both the jihadi and the paramilitary groups, to spread their message. The paper argued how the internet was used to propagate a narrative to create and disseminate a common identity and a reason to be part of the global jihadi movement.

Furthermore, the research also argued how **internet and social media** enabled them to communicate while avoiding surveillance and censorship. The internet is increasingly available, easy to use, and relatively affordable in Indonesia. No wonder that with such immense flow of information, the process of mobilizing people has become so much easier. Supported by freedom of information and limited control by the government, various radical and fundamentalist organizations find it easy to gain like-minded supporters.

Lastly, in understanding the pattern used by jihadi and terrorist groups in doing their movement, ICG noted the importance to identify the **family connection and kinship** of the groups. Most of the leaders in such groups use extended family connection or marriage to form stronger relationships within the groups. In many cases, it was found that the main supporter of terrorist suspect came from their family.

WHERE DOES THE ISLAMIC STATE GROUP (IS) FIT INTO THE PICTURE?³

In order to compensate for battlefield and territorial losses, IS is reinventing itself and seeking to expand globally in both cyber and physical space. IS now relies on its *wilayat* (territory) as its operational bases in the Middle East, Africa, Caucasus and Asia.

IS decentralisation to its *wilayat* and enclaves after its territorial losses in Iraq and Syria has implications for South East Asia where it has appointed an emir and accepted pledges of allegiance from multiple terrorist groups from Indonesia and the Philippines. The continued use of cyber space and social media has made the terrorism threat decentralized and harder to detect, with smaller cells plotting attacks and recruiting through encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp.

“Official figures show there are 1,200 returnees from Syria and many of them are not detained owing to the weakness in Indonesia’s anti-terrorism law 15/2003 which does not cover terror acts committed

³ The analysis in this section is mainly taken from the journal of *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Volume 10, Issue 1, January 2018, published by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

outside of Indonesia,” reported Channel News Asia in May 2018. The unofficial figure could be higher than 2,000.⁴

An analyst predicted that upon their return to the country, religious moderation would not be appealing to them since they still adhere to the militant, warzone mind-set, and that it would be simply a matter of time before they bring the war home.

In Indonesia, *Jamaah Ansharud Daulah* (JAD), the largest Indonesian pro-Islamic State militant group, continues to dominate Indonesia’s terrorism landscape. Overall, there were 12 terrorist attacks and five foiled plots in 2017, with police officers being the main targets. It is worth noting that the suicide bombers in the recent Surabaya church bombings belonged to JAD and had allegedly just returned from a paramilitary training with IS in Syria.

Before the May 2018 incident, Detachment 88, the police anti-terror unit, had arrested about 96 terrorist suspects. Additionally, Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has conducted de-radicalization programmes that have attempted to de-radicalize around 200 deportees while working with Detachment-88 and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The theme of revenge attacks is therefore strong as police officers have become the main targets because of their involvement in killing militants.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Unless the government changes the national anti-terrorism law to allow prosecution of terrorist suspects⁵, comes up with a more sustainable and effective de-radicalization program—especially for over 1,200 Indonesian *ihadists* who have returned from Syria—and introduces a curriculum on pluralism and religious tolerance in public schools, we can expect more attacks against Christians to take place in the future on a wider and more severe scale, since Islamic militant strategy seems to be constantly evolving.

⁴ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/surabaya-attack-teen-suicide-bomber-seen-crying-inconsolably-10244778>, (updated 19 May 2018), last accessed 29 May 2018.

⁵ The proposed amendments to Law No. 15/2003 on the Eradication of Terrorism would allow Indonesians to be stripped of their citizenship if suspected of traveling abroad to “join wars overseas in order to commit terrorism crimes,” and permit criminal penalties for any “speech, thought, behavior or writings” that could lead to “actions which adversely impact other people/communities.” But the amendment has yet to be approved.