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Attacks on Indonesian Police: Not Just Terrorism?

By Jennifer Yang Hui

Synopsis

Counterterrorism success overshadows the seeming inability of the police to win the hearts and minds of Indonesian society. It is important to understand the historical reasons for this distrust of the state's domestic or civil security apparatus. As such, it might be time to implement meaningful policing reforms.

Commentary

IN RECENT YEARS, Indonesia has experienced a number of successes on the counterterrorism front. In October 2012 for example, eleven suspected terrorists were arrested across four provinces in a coordinated effort of the country. On 31 October 2012, five more suspects were arrested and one killed in Poso, Central Sulawesi. Despite such successes in counterterrorism, the police still have some way to go to win the hearts and minds of Indonesians.

This distrust is historical in nature, and is observable in: (a) community hostility towards the police; (b) anti-state rumours; and (c) societal preference for taking matters into their own hands (vigilantism). Therefore while the Indonesian police may have gained success as a result of its counterterrorism efforts, a generally unimpressive overall record of policing has eroded that success, and if this state of affairs continues, it would prove more costly in the long term.

Attacks on Police: a deeper problem?

On 26 July 2011, the Head of the Indonesian National Body for the Counterterrorism (BNPT), Ansyad Mbai, said that terrorist groups previously targeted representations of the "West", but had now shifted their tactics to domestic targets such as the police. This was because the organisation was always responsible for disrupting terrorist activities. The observation was confirmed by a string of attacks on the police such as murder of the two policemen who were investigating a terrorist training camp in Poso, Central Sulawesi in October 2012. In August 2012, a police had been shot and a grenade was thrown into a guard post in Solo, Central Java. While counterterrorism officials have been concerned with the seeming change in targets of terrorists from Western installations to domestic ones, the reality is that attacks on security officials in Indonesia have never been the sole prerogative of the jihadists. The issue is not so black and white.

In fact anti-police sentiment is actually quite rife in Indonesia. For instance, civil society is increasingly practising vigilantism in dealing with law breakers rather than waiting for the police. Some petty criminals like pickpockets

have been publicly executed, while others have had to be ironically helped by the police to escape angry mobs demanding restitution. In other cases, the police themselves have been attacked by angry mobs. A 2012 International Crisis Group (ICG) report has documented many cases of anti-police violence that were organised by civil society groups. In 2010, for instance, residents of Buol in Central Sulawesi rioted against the police in protest of the death of a resident who was believed to have been tortured to death in police custody. Also, in February 2011 residents of Kampar, Riau, attacked a police building following the incarceration of a man who was believed to have been innocent of the crime he was charged with.

The distrust of the civil security sector in Indonesia is also evident by the spread of rumours critical and/or casting suspicions on the police. For instance, it has been alleged that the spate of so-called terrorist incidents in Indonesia are actually engineered by New Order elements trying to wrestle their way back to power. Islamic fundamentalists like Ja'afar Umar Thalib, who led a paramilitary group to fight for the Muslims in Maluku and North Maluku during the outbreak of the sectarian violence in 1999, suggested that his group had been tricked into doing so by the Indonesian security forces, who were cooperating with the US intelligence services to prove their point that Indonesia was falling into the hands of terrorists. Whatever their basis in reality, rumours are often a reflection of societal anxieties. The idea of 'elite instigation' in this respect is firmly rooted in both popular and intellectual imagination in Indonesia.

Origins of anti-police sentiment

The origins of such anti-police sentiment are rooted in the New Order era, when a general distrust of the state emerged. The New Order, a term referring to the late President Suharto's iron-fisted rule between 1967 and 1998, was instrumental in fostering anti-state sentiment in Indonesian society. The former Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia's (ABRI) human rights abuses in East Timor, killing of political dissidents (petrus or pembunuhan misterius ; mysterious killings) and Suharto's callous terminology of these measures as "shock therapy" necessary for the society were all factors in his downfall in 1998 and are in fact still fresh in the memories of many Indonesians.

Hence, even after the reformation of the Armed Forces and the post-New Order government's commitment to democracy and respect for human rights, the Indonesian police still struggles with an image of being corrupt and contemptuous of human rights. Hence attacks on the Indonesian police by jihadi groups are only symptoms of a deeper problem. Jihadi groups are actually presented with a reservoir of societal discontent against the police that they can leverage, to elicit sympathy for their cause. They may argue that they are not targeting innocent civilians but the police as the representatives of the infidel state.

Meaningful police reform

The police sector in Indonesia is in need of serious reform. Police officers need to remember that there is still widespread public distrust of them, and as a result, should not treat criticism and dissent lightly but rather look inward to ascertain the root causes of such criticism. Jihadist attacks on the police should not be addressed in isolation from the wider problem of generally poor police-civil society relations.

It is imperative for the government to work towards improving the public image of the Indonesian security forces while training police officers to be more professional and efficient. Respect for human rights and measures to curb corruption should be on the reform agenda as well. This is a small but necessary start, and confidence-building measures are necessary to win back public trust.

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