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The Jakarta Assault: Pre-empting the Rise of IS Indonesia

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The Paris-style 14 January 2016 assault by pro-IS militants in the heart of Jakarta is a game-changer. Indonesia's leaders are closing ranks as the Jokowi government pursues a long-term response amid the growing IS threat in the region.

Commentary

SARINAH AT Thamrin, Indonesia's oldest shopping plaza in Jakarta, is just next to a Starbucks café - a popular meeting place for yuppies, expatriates and others - that became the target of an audacious suicide bomb-and-gun assault by militants on 14 January 2016. Indonesian supporters of Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility, with police linking them to an emergent loose alliance of nine cells called the *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah* (JAD).

Immediate public reaction, however, showed that the brazen attacks only succeeded to alienate Jakarta's population. Shocked Indonesians took to social media to show defiance with hastags such as *#KamiTidakTakut* (WeAreNotAfraid). The same week, a local public opinion poll showed 95 percent of those interviewed nation-wide rejected IS and its methods.

Strategic location

Why did the militants attack the Starbucks cafe and a nearby police post when they could have chosen other malls? Jakarta city's police chief Tito Karnavian pointed to two key targets – symbols of Westernism and the state security apparatus, especially the police.

Strategically located at Jalan Thamrin, a major boulevard, the two targets lie in the heart of Jakarta Pusat (the “Navel of Jakarta”). They are within a 20-minute drive to a number of prominent sites - the US, French and other embassies; a United Nations office; international media hubs; and government buildings. Indeed, within the same radius from Sarinah are the Ritz Carlton and JW Marriott hotels which were bombed in 2009. As any of these places could be within their reach, the attackers were perhaps indicating that the assault in Jalan Thamrin was just the beginning.

Unprecedented in scope and tactics, the attacks took terrorist violence in Indonesia to a new level. Prior to this, the modus operandi was largely by suicide bombings – the 2002 Bali bomb blasts; the 2004 car bomb outside the Australian embassy; the 2005 triple bombs in Bali; and the 2009 twin bomb attacks on JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels.

A new ball-game

This time, it was a combination of suicide bombings and gunfire – a simultaneous, coordinated and multi-targeted assault, reportedly involving even a bike-mounted offensive. Perhaps this was the “*konser*” (concert) that the militants had referred to in a coded threat. Four attackers were killed while six more who were directly involved were arrested in subsequent police raids. In terms of body count, the attacks were, however, seen as a failure. But it has also exposed Jakarta’s vulnerability to urban terrorist assault ala Mumbai and Paris.

Officials close to the palace told *RSIS Commentary* that the attackers were second-liners after the first team had been neutralised following pre-emptive police strikes prior to Christmas and New Year’s Day. “We were lucky that the second team were amateurish,” says Atmadji Sumarkidjo, special assistant to the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs.

Greenlight for the attacks was apparently given by Aman Abdurrahman, the jailed spiritual leader of JAD, also known as *Jamaah Ansharut Khalifah Daulah Nusantara* (JAKDN). Aman directed through Bahrn Naim, whom police alleged as the mastermind of the Thamrin assault. One of the dead militants – Suhakim (or ‘Afif’) - had visited Aman in jail for ‘blessings’. Bahrn Naim, believed to be in Syria, has a bigger ambition of setting up an IS ‘province’ in Southeast Asia, covering not just Indonesia but also Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. According to a well-placed source, Bahrn Naim had also set sights on a possible attack in Singapore. “For him, Singapore is like a prize to be won,” says this source.

Indonesian national police chief Badrodin Haiti says the pro-IS network has a core of four Indonesian leaders – Bahrumsyah, Bahrn Naim and Salim Mubarok At-Tamimi or Abu Jandal, led by Aman Abdurrahman as *amir* (leader) and ideologue. The Syria-based Bahrumsyah allegedly funded the attacks by sending back one billion rupiah (US\$72,000). A fifth member linked to Aman is Santoso.

JAKDN was formed in March last year, comprising supporters of IS from Southeast Asia for the Syrian front. According to the police chief, JAKDN brings together nine

hitherto disparate groups – essentially amounting to a loose network of IS-inspired cells. Media reports say JAD/JAKDN's adviser is Abu Bakar Ba'asyir but this has been denied by Ba'asyir's lawyers.

Jakarta's three-pronged response

The Thamrin attacks have jolted Indonesia's political elite into unprecedented cohesion and action. Within days, the government of President Joko Widodo and the fractious legislative branch closed ranks to reform the currently weak anti-terror law by giving it effective preventive powers. The legislative changes look set to be passed soon, notwithstanding whimpers of concern by some groups over possible abuse. This is the first significant change.

The second big move forthcoming is closer coordination of three domestic intelligence bodies and the creation of a fourth - *Badan Siber Nasional* (National Cyber Agency). The three existing ones are the national intelligence agency *Badan Intelijen Nasional* (BIN); the military intelligence unit *Badan Intelijen Strategis* (BAIS); and the police's counter-terrorism arm *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terrorisme* (BNPT).

The third response - directly relevant to Indonesia's neighbours – is closer cooperation and coordination between Jakarta and the regional intelligence agencies, as alluded to by the coordinating minister this week. Backed by the United States, Indonesia has secured the support of Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines, with Thailand still pending. Overarching this will be closer personal links and communication amongst the region's top leadership which Jakarta wants to forge, given their common and growing threat from IS and its affiliates.

Can Jokowi carry the ground?

The effectiveness of Indonesia's counter response to the 14 January Thamrin assault ultimately depends on the leadership of President Joko Widodo, currently hampered by his limited political base despite his popularity. He needs to win over the hostile parliament to push through reforms of the anti-terrorism law.

His political battle to strengthen his minority government seems to be succeeding as more parties from that bloc have either crossed over or plan to do so following his wooing. The game-changer will be Golkar, which is now patching up a major split between two rival factions. Over the weekend, the faction led by Aburizal Bakrie hinted of repositioning Golkar as a government supporter - without leaving the non-governing coalition.

The political ground is moving towards a stronger Jokowi government in the face of a growing threat from IS. This will have implications for Indonesia's neighbours as well. What President Jokowi needs now is the full support of the Muslim community. He has a headstart as the two biggest Islamic movements – Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah – may be behind him. Yet another game-changer could emerge should both groups break new ground by jointly leading the mainstream counter-narrative that IS, fundamentally, is antithetical to Islam.

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