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Bilveer Singh

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Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia: Making Sense of the US Ban

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

The US decision to ban the MMI in June 2017 signals a new policy towards groups allegedly linked with Al Qaeda. This is happening as the US prepares for the emergence of a post-ISIS terrorist terrain in Southeast Asia.

Commentary

DESPITE BEING in existence since 2000, the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), or the Indonesian Mujahidin Council, was only belatedly designated as a foreign terrorist organisation by the United States on 12 June 2017. In this regard, the MMI joins other Indonesian jihadi groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), as well as individuals such as Hambali and Abu Bakar Bashir designated as terrorists or terrorist groups.

According to the State Department's finding, the MMI was an 'Indonesian-based terrorist group formed by Abu Bakar Bashir'. Bashir was already designated a terrorist as co-founder of JI. In 2000, Bashir established the MMI and simultaneously headed both JI and the MMI, to the unhappiness of many Indonesian jihadists. Abu Rusydan, a former Emir of JI, told the author that leading Indonesian jihadists believe that "one captain should not command two ships at the same time".

The US Ban and MMI's Protest

The MMI was said to have "conducted attacks in Indonesia, including claiming responsibility for a May 2012 attack at a book launch" in Jakarta that left three people injured. A Canadian author, Irshad Manji, launched her book titled *Allah*,

Liberty and Love, which championed liberal values à la the West. The US also claimed that MMI was linked to Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, the Jabhat al-Nusra.

On 14 June 2017, MMI's spokesperson, Irfan Awwas protested the US ban. He argued that the US claims were lies and slanderous. He denied three US charges. First, the claim that Bashir was the leader of MMI. When the Majelis Mujahidin was first established in 2000, its leader was Bashir. However, Bashir established a new group called Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) in 2008 and resigned as Majelis Mujahidin's leader. Majelis Mujahidin renamed itself as MMI.

Hence, Irfan claimed that MMI was not Majelis Mujahidin and Bashir who was alleged to be the leader of JI was also not its leader since 2008. Irfan denied that MMI was a violent group. He also denied that the MMI had any links with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Making Sense of the US Ban

Clearly, June 2017 would stand out as an interesting month in US-Indonesian relations as far as non-Islamic State terrorist groups are concerned. In June 2017, the US not only designated MMI as a terrorist group but also announced its intention to try Hambali. What united these actions is that both Hambali and the MMI were allegedly linked with terrorism and its foreign sponsor, Al Qaeda.

Hambali, despite being arrested in 2003 and detained in Guantanamo Bay prison, was never formally charged until June 2017. The same was true with regard to the MMI, where many of its leaders were linked to JI, which was responsible for most of the bombings in Indonesia from 1999 to 2009.

Though belated, the US decision to try Hambali and ban MMI was expected as Washington is fully cognisant of not only Hambali's capabilities but also of the mobilising capacity of the MMI. Even though the MMI had tried to rebrand itself as a peaceful organisation, in reality, it is one of Indonesia's most active Salafist organisations to challenge the existing secular political order with the aim of establishing an Islamic state.

MMI's key activities in the last few years included accusing the Joko Widodo government of being soft on communists, deviant Islamic sects and of being pro-West and pro-China. The MMI took a leading role since September 2016, in collusion with the Front Pembela Islam (FPI), another militant Salafist organisation, in trying to bring down the Christian Jakarta Governor of ethnic Chinese descent Basuki Thahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok. As Governor Ahok was accused of blasphemy and the MMI wanted him to be banned from contesting the gubernatorial elections as well as jailed for his crime, which he was eventually to suffer.

That the MMI had links with Jabhat al-Nusra was evident from the more than 100 pro-Al Qaeda and pro-JI Indonesians, who 'migrated' to Syria and Iraq to join Jabhat al-Nusra to fight against ISIS and the Assad regime. In fact, Abu Muhammad Jibriel, who is the Deputy Emir of MMI, lost his son, Ridwan, in combat while fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra in March 2015.

Irfan Awwas is also the younger brother of Abu Muhammad Jibriel. That MMI's members are involved in military operations in the Middle East must have reinforced Washington's belief of MMI's capability for violent operations, despite its claims to the contrary.

US Game Plan

Clearly, what must have forced Washington's hand to act against both the MMI and Hambali was the realisation that a new jihadi terrain has emerged in Indonesia. Following the rise of IS in June 2014, Al Qaeda-oriented groups such as JI and MMI have been slowly expanding their reach in Indonesia. The focus on IS took the security agencies' attention away from JI and MMI, helping them to reorganise and grow almost unhindered compared to the period from 2002 to 2013 when these groups were almost dismantled.

From this perspective, the US' designation of MMI as a terrorist group appears to be the Trump administration's strategic move to prepare for a post-IS terrorist landscape in Indonesia. With IS and its affiliated groups expected to be severely degraded globally, there is every danger that pro-Al Qaeda groups such as JI and MMI would become more important in Indonesia.

To that extent, the designation of the MMI as a terrorist group is a pre-emptive move to mitigate the restart of its jihadist activities in Indonesia. That pro-Al Qaeda groups such as JI would resume their violent campaign is something former JI leaders, such as its Emir, Abu Rusydan, had warned in the past, including in an interview with the author.

The US has remained a key strategic and security player in Southeast Asia. Its decision on MMI and bringing Hambali to trial is a clear signal that Washington intends to assist Southeast Asian states to keep the jihadists on the run and prevent their re-emergence in the terrain post-ISIS and post-Marawi City.

Bilveer Singh PhD is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
