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Indonesians' Response to Jakarta Attacks: New Strategy to Curb ISIS' Influence?

By Md Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman

Synopsis

Indonesians' response to the recent Jakarta terror attacks marks a significant shift of attitude toward terrorism and martyrdom. It is a stark contrast to seven years ago when a similar situation took place in the world's most populous Muslim country.

Commentary

THERE APPEARS to be a noticeable shift in attitude among a section of Indonesians towards the notion of martyrdom as practised by Islamist militants, most recently in the 14 January attacks in Jakarta.

Seven years ago, when three of the four convicted 2002 Bali bombers were executed by firing squad, their bodies were given a heroic burial by villagers in their respective hometowns. Some even claimed that they were the true symbols of martyrdom. There was a black banner with a worrying quote in Bahasa Indonesia that read "3 Orang Mati Syahid TUMBUH 3,000 MUJAHID" ["The death of 3 MARTYRS gives rise to 3000 MUJAHID (jihadi fighters)."]

Although sympathy for the trio notably came mostly from their villages, to a certain degree, it also reflected the confused support for the Bali bombers, probably because the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) that they were affiliated with was not portrayed as brutal and inhumane as the so-called Islamic State that came thereafter.

Community rejection of terrorism

It was a contrast in the case of Ahmad Muhazan and Sunakim alias Afif, two of the four dead terrorists in this month's Jakarta attacks. The media reported that villagers

rejected the bodies of both militants for burial. The duo's involvement in the attacks was seen as an act that tarnished the image of Islam.

A white-coloured banner was erected in Indramayu, West Java, in the hometown of suicide bomber Ahmad Muhazan. It read "*Warga Kedungwungu – Indramayu Menolak – Mayat – Teroris*" ("The People of Kedungwungu – Indramayu Reject the body of Terrorist"). The media also reported that substantial numbers of locals demonstrated to reinforce the rejection. What is more glaring this time was the participation of a local ulama (religious scholar) in the rally to register the point. A similar though less intense response greeted fellow attacker Afif's body. The people of the village in Subang, West Java where Afif was born rejected his burial there despite his wife's appeal. They saw his action as not just a disgrace to the community but also a violation of law and religion.

Elsewhere, the local Islamic youth movement in Purwokerto, Central Java, took to the street in protest against the 14 January attacks. They were reportedly carrying placards that read "Let's reject the caliphate - it damages Indonesian unity". At the site of the attacks, people were seen walking around holding placards "*Kami Berduka #KamiTidakTakut* (We are sad #WeAreNotAfraid), *Kami Berduka #IndonesiaTidakTakut* (We are sad #IndonesiansNotAfraid)".

Indonesians' growing public antipathy towards terrorism is a healthy development. They should turn this into a positive social movement to counter the growth of ISIS.

Why the different response this time?

While there is some support for ISIS in Indonesian society, there is an even stronger evidence of growing opposition to ISIS that is worth analysing. There could be two reasons. Firstly, relative to JI, ISIS' behaviour is barbaric and cruel. JI had mostly carried out bomb attacks while ISIS is synonymous with unprecedented persecutions ever committed by any terror groups in the last century. The beheading of captives; the burning of POWs alive; the hurling down of gay couples from tower blocks, among others, have won the group a notorious reputation.

Soon after ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks, Indonesians had no qualms to disavow the group, its agenda and anyone associated with it. Secondly, Indonesia has been, for decades, marred by terrorist activities. The twin bombings of the JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels in 2009 were the last major terrorist attack in Indonesia that made headlines around the world.

But Indonesians are increasingly defying the terrorists, as could be seen in how quickly Jakartans recovered from the 14 January attacks. Such unprecedented defiance should come as a major disappointment for ISIS and its minions. A bottom-up approach to deal with terrorism is the way forward for Indonesia to curb ISIS' influence in Indonesia.

What can Jakarta do?

Public protests against the 14 January attacks reflected genuine sentiment on the ground. Indonesia should intensify its ongoing community engagement programme.

For example, the Agency for National and Political Unity (Bakesbangpol) constantly engages high school students to create awareness on the danger of terrorism. This could be intensified by getting tech-savvy students to act as ambassadors of peace, spreading anti-terrorism messages through the #hashtag movement.

It is a trendy way of expressing one's feelings these days especially among the youth. We have seen how recent Indonesian anti-ISIS demonstrations rode on similar platforms to convey their opposition toward ISIS. The #hashtag movement has the potential to evolve into a national movement against terrorism in general and ISIS in particular.

Another way to project this work as a bottom-up initiative is by getting local and international Jakarta-based business enterprises as partners. They could play a more significant role in the respective Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) domain by stepping forward to sponsor a streamlined anti-terrorism educational kit or public education pamphlet.

These could be in the form of bite-size information on why terrorism is a serious national security problem that stands between Indonesians and their national aspiration to live in unity and peace. Alternatively, similar messages can also be conveyed through advertisements on billboards found across Jakarta, bus and train stations and even shopping malls.

There is a need to magnify public sentiments against terrorism in Indonesia. Instead of giving the spotlight to terrorist attacks which only strengthens their appeal, more coverage should now be given to initiatives to build community resilience. This is how society will eventually be the decisive force that will defeat terrorism.

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