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Darul Islam: Old Brand, New Image

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On 30th May, several newspapers reported that the Malaysian police have arrested 12 militants in the east coast towns of Sandakan and Tawau in the state of Sabah. Of the 12 arrested, ten were Indonesians, two were Malaysians and all are said to be members of Indonesia's Darul Islam (DI) movement.

Members of the group are alleged to have been planning attacks on several neighboring countries. Along with their arrests, the police seized several firearms, documents and bomb-making instructions downloaded from the Internet. The location and dates of the planned attacks, however, were not disclosed.

The arrests in Sabah come as no surprise. It has been the transit route - one of many - for many Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members and other groups going to the Southern Filipino island of Mindanao for training. Traversing these states is easy due to the porous maritime borders and the lax border policing by Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. However, the recent arrests point to a more significant development. DI members are increasingly embracing JI's ideology and struggle when previously, the former was more commonly associated with the local struggle of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia. What could be the reasons and the contributing factors for this shift?

Radicalization of DI to JI

A difference in ideology is one of the main reasons for JI's split from DI in the early 1990s. The late founder of JI, Abdullah Sungkar, was influenced by the concept of a global jihad. This influence was the result of his experience in the Afghan-Soviet war in which he took on the prominent role of sending Indonesian mujahideen to fight in Afghanistan. As he tried to shape DI into a regional, or even global, jihadist movement similar to Al-Qaeda, he faced opposition from a senior DI figure, Ajengan Masduki. This and other differences between the two figures subsequently led to the formalization of a split as well as the birth of the JI. While rivalry and jealousy plagued the relations of the top leadership in both groups, relations remain cordial among the mid and lower lever cadres.

DI remains a significant force among JI members despite the separation. The first batch of JI members was mostly former DI members. Meanwhile, among the younger generation of JI members, there are several whose fathers were or still are DI members. It is thus not

surprising that DI's name has resurfaced along with JI in the investigation of major attacks that have taken place thus far in Indonesia.

It is probable that the recent arrests and the implication of individual DI's members in previous terrorist attacks signal a crack in the relations between the senior figures and the younger members of the group. But there are other factors that should also be taken into account.

Old Brand, New Image?

There have been lingering rumors that many DI members, specifically the younger generation, are getting impatient with the passiveness of the senior figures of the group. While the younger members want direct action and immediate gratification, the senior figures are opting for a slower more peaceful approach as many have experienced imprisonment during the Soeharto's era. Experience has taught them that using violence to achieve one's goal may not always be the wisest course of action. Moreover, by opting for a more time-consuming but more peaceful approach, they benefit from being kept off the radar screens of the intelligence agencies. The differences in strategy between the younger and older generation has caused a sharp division within the DI as many of the senior figures are too weak to exercise control over its younger and more radical followers. In the absence of charismatic and influential senior leaders, the latter are free to act unhindered.

Among the jihadist circles in Indonesia, DI members are often labeled as local jihadists whereas JI members are seen as the regional or global jihadists. This has fueled jealousy within certain DI's circles who seek the same amount of publicity that has been bestowed on JI. This in turn leads to competition for resources. In this regard, the shift among some DI members to take on a more regional approach to jihad is no more than a competition for power and publicity. As an ex-militant aptly puts it, "DI has degenerated into a group of warlords".

It is not impossible to assume that JI members, specifically those from Noordin Top's faction, have infiltrated DI factions. This has subsequently led to the latter's shift in ideology. Personal relations have been forged between members of the two sides, making infiltration by JI highly feasible. Due to sympathy and a sense of Muslim brotherhood, DI members will not hesitate to accommodate its more radical counterpart. As a result, the boundary lines separating the two groups have blurred. Technically, those individuals who have embraced JI's ideology are JI members but remain DI in name. By not taking on the new name, they confuse the authorities and avoid the notoriety that has been attributed to JI.

Conclusion

DI has continually demonstrated its resilience by being able to evolve. It started out as an anti-colonial movement that evolved into an anti-secular anti-Indonesian government movement following the attainment of independence. Is it now in a transition phase of becoming a JI-like movement? The possibility should not be ruled out although we must not be quick to jump to conclusions. As of now, only a minority remains influenced by JI's ideology and shows the desire to wage a regional, if not global, jihad. The authorities have to deal with the situation carefully so as not to radicalize more DI members and push them towards JI's bosom.

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