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Lessons from the Foiled Terrorist Attack in Palembang

Fatima Astuti

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The arrest of 10 suspected terrorists in Sumatra has revealed a connection between terrorist and radical groups. It demonstrates that JI can turn non-violent radical members into operational terrorists. It is thus important for the Indonesian government to build up its counter ideology programme as part of its counter terrorism efforts.

INDONESIA'S COUNTER terrorism unit, Detachment 88, announced the arrest of 10 suspected terrorists, including a Singaporean, in Palembang, South Sumatra in early July. Eight have been identified: Musa alias Abdul Rahman, Sugi, Wahyufi, Heri, Ani Sugandi alias Gandhi, Rohman, Ali Mursadi Agus Carang, and Muhamed Hassan Syanuddin alias Alim.

Muhamed Hassan is a Singaporean man who was arrested on 28 June 2008. Known to his wife as Fajar Taslim, Hassan was born in 1972 in Semarang, Java. Hassan allegedly trained as a bomb maker in Afghanistan, and under the deceased Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) bomber Dr Azahari Hussin. Hassan is a brother of Muhamed Hussain Syanuddin, a JI member who was detained under the Internal Security Act in Singapore and released in June 2007. He is also known to be an associate of Mas Selamat Kastari, a leader of JI in Singapore who escaped from a Singapore detention centre in February 2008. Hassan was part of group of five, all Singaporeans, that evaded the Internal Security Department (ISD) dragnet that caught 15 people in December 2001. Hassan and Mas Selamat allegedly entered Indonesia by ship via Belawan port in Medan in January 2002.

The Palembang Group

This Palembang JI cell is believed to have planned to attack Café Bedudal in the western Sumatran city but changed its plan to attack targets in Jakarta. The authorities recovered numerous amounts of explosives and computer hard drives, but most importantly the arrests revealed a link between JI and an ostensibly non-violent extremist group, the Anti-Apostasy Movement Forum (FAKTA).

Like JI, FAKTA considers itself to be a neo-salafist group. The neo-salafists claim to emulate the Prophet and His four Companions, the *As Salafus Saalih* (the Righteous Predecessors). Their approach is very much influenced by Islamic thinkers and scholars such as Ibn Taymiyah and Muhammad ibn

Abdul Wahab.

Four of the 10 arrested were members of the Palembang branch of FAKTA, including Musa alias Abdul Rahman, who is the Head of FAKTA Palembang branch. FAKTA was formed in 1998 to guard the Muslim faith from the danger of apostasy and to bring back the Islam that existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and His four Companions. Even though FAKTA has been extreme in its ideological approach to apostasy, it has portrayed itself as a non-violent group.

The relationship between FAKTA in Palembang and JI seems to have emerged a few years back when Musa, Gandhi, and others who were active members of the Palembang branch, together with JI operative Asadullah, became involved in a 2005 attempt to assassinate Reverend Joshua, a Christian leader in Bandung. Asadullah, alias Arsyad, was sentenced in 2007 to 15 years in jail by the Maluku State Court for his relationship with KOMPAK, a JI-linked organization, during the Maluku conflict. He was believed then to have connections with a number of JI leaders, including Abdullah Sonata, a JI-financier who funded JI training camps in Southern Philippines, Maluku and Poso.

The connection between JI and FAKTA-Palembang seems at this stage to be based on personal ties between a few individuals; there is no evidence that other FAKTA members in Jakarta or elsewhere in the country were aware of the terrorist plotting. But it does mean that JI has access to a growing network of radical organisations to recruit members to replenish itself.

Lessons Learned

The fact that some members of a radical group that professes itself to be non-violent were prepared to engage with a known terrorist group shows that terrorism is a vicious by-product of ideological extremism. This case is similar to the 2007 arrests in Central Java, where members of a non-violent neo-salafi organization called *Forum Kajian Islam* (FORKIS, Islamic Study Forum), were convinced by JI to become operational terrorists. These FORKIS members decided to use violent tactics after undergoing study group discussions using, books and VCDs provided by other extremist organizations.

Extremists in Indonesia are able to tap into an extensive network of publishers, as seen during the Islamic Book Fair in 2008, held in Jakarta and other cities. The fair attracted 82 companies and showcased more than 25,000 books. One of the most controversial publications was the *Jihadmagz*, which provided stories from the global jihad.

The recent Palembang arrest has shown that there is a thin line that separates non-violent and violent neo-salafi groups. It is vital for the Indonesian government to be more comprehensive in its counter terrorism strategy, for example strengthening the rules governing the publishing and media industry. New laws are not required; the media is already bound by the Press Law No. 40 of 1999. In article 5 of the law, the national press is told that it should respect religious and social norms in society in their publications.

But the same law does not provide a clear definition of religious norms. The current law does not reflect the reality of Indonesia's new terrorist phenomenon, especially the flourishing of the jihadist publishing industry. In late 2007, the government revealed that it planned to revise Press Law No. 40 of 1999. In early 2008, however, there was disagreement within the press community over the need to tighten the law, due to the fear within the media industry that the government would sacrifice freedom of expression for increased security.

Tackling the ideological roots of radicalization

According to a 2007 poll by Lembaga Survei Indonesia (Indonesia Survey Institute or LSI), radicalism

is winning more support in Indonesia although around 57% of Indonesian Muslims are inclined towards secular political values. Around 19% of the Indonesian Muslims surveyed believed that the World Trade Centre attacks on 11 September 2001 were justifiable as a jihad to defend Islam. The LSI survey also showed that in the last three years, 10% of Indonesian Muslims supported the struggles of JI and 17% supported the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the two prominent radical Muslim organizations in Indonesia.

The recent arrests have also shown how radical groups are replenishing JI's operational capability. The radical groups can easily become points of entry to convince parts of the population, who are already unhappy with the living conditions in the struggling nation, to turn to violent ideology or acts.

The Indonesian government has been successful in using security forces, such as its special Detachment 88, to suppress violent activists. However, the latest arrests again illustrate the importance of, and failure to address, the ideological roots of radicalization. It is clear that the Indonesian government should build up more systematic and comprehensive methods in their counter terrorism efforts. The use of some rules other than the anti-terrorism law, such as the use of the Law of the Press, may prevent society from becoming the victims of terrorist acts. Amending the Press Law will help address the spread of radical ideas.

Bearing in mind that Indonesia is a fledgling democracy, counter terrorism efforts should not however violate the freedom of religion and expression, as well as other basic human rights. What is critical is to bring wider Muslim society into the effort. Ultimately it is the society that will delegitimize the use of violence, and decide on the legitimacy of the goals of the radical and extremists groups.

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