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Title	To segregate or disperse? The management of imprisoned extremists
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Citation	Sumpter, C. (2016). To segregate or disperse? The management of imprisoned extremists. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 060). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2016-03-21
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/40425
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To Segregate or Disperse? The Management of Imprisoned Extremists

By Cameron Sumpter

Synopsis

Separating extremist prisoners from general inmate populations mitigates certain risks while posing others. A proposed new facility in Indonesia will be seeking the right balance.

Commentary

PLANS TO transfer prisoners convicted of terrorism charges to a purpose-built ‘de-radicalisation’ facility have re-emerged in Indonesia, following increased concerns of recidivism and inmate recruitment. In the works are additions to a series of maximum security cell blocks at the International Peace and Security Centre (IPSC) compound in Sentul, south of Jakarta, where the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) is headquartered.

Those at the heart of the scheme have insisted the new facility will not be a “special prison”, but rather “a place for intensive counselling for ex-terrorists”. Though given the stated aims include preventing the spread of radical views among general prison populations and easing pressure on overcrowded penitentiaries, the impetus for isolation appears to be broader than simply pre-parole preparation. The underlying dilemma is one which a number of governments are currently pondering: is it better to segregate extremist prisoners or disperse them among the general inmate population?

Dispersal – Opening or Influencing Minds?

The first conscious decision to disperse terrorist prisoners came in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, when it was deemed necessary to break up the Irish

Republican Army's penitentiary power base within the notorious Maze Prison in Belfast. Today, unmanageable inmates – both extremists and general troublemakers – are routinely shifted between eight dispersal prisons in order to avoid the entrenchment of problems and the development of undesirable relationships.

Preventing the concentration of prisoners with similar extremist worldviews may mitigate the chance of ideologies becoming further internalised through processes of mutual reinforcement. Proponents of dispersal also argue that interaction with group outsiders can promote social inclusion among extremists, and that valuable intelligence may be collected from the close observation of these dynamics.

With that said, there is an obvious problem associated with integrating persuasive radicals and naïve delinquents under the same roof. IRA militants were never interested in recruiting common criminals, whom they considered to be unsuitably ill-disciplined. But the unstructured nature of the global jihadist movement, and its combination of anti-establishment rhetoric with an ostensibly pious religious framework, mean it is generally open to anyone and potentially attractive to angry young criminals seeking both redemption and the protection of a prison gang.

Spain has recognised this, and while the government maintains a dispersal policy for imprisoned ethno-nationalist Basque separatists, jihadi extremists are largely segregated from the general prison population. The UK is also revisiting the utility of dispersal and a review by the Secretary of State for Justice is currently underway, which is expected to recommend a move toward the strategic separation of imprisoned extremists.

Segregation – A Balancing Act

The United States houses the majority of its extremist prisoners in two relatively new maximum security facilities called Communication Management Units (CMUs). As the name suggests these specialised prisons allow for total control and surveillance of inmates' interactions; security is the absolute priority, and the reportedly repressive environments are not ideally conducive to rehabilitation initiatives.

Strictly speaking, the US approach does not involve total segregation as prisoners associated with jihadi groups are mixed with a sprinkling of inmates convicted of crimes such as environmental terrorism and tax evasion. Tellingly though, prison officials refer to these individuals as 'balancers', as they serve to deflect accusations that the CMUs are terrorist prisons. If true, the strategy has not been overly successful – the two facilities are often referred to as 'Guantanamo North'.

This is a key problem with the segregation model. US Vice President Joe Biden once called the Guantanamo Bay prison complex "the greatest propaganda tool that exists for recruiting terrorists around the world". While segregating extremist prisoners does not logically equate to waterboarding and torturously loud children's music, memories of Guantanamo scandals and the Abu Ghraib atrocity mean that any remotely comparable facility established today risks being painted with the same brush.

France appears to be seeking to avoid this problem by creating designated wings for

extremists in established prisons. Two were completed in January 2016 and the government plans to have five up and running by the end of March. The specialised wings will differ from the US model in that rehabilitation – or so-called de-radicalisation efforts will be the focus, with dozens of counsellors and psychologists recruited to work towards positive change.

An interesting example of a mixed approach is Denmark, which has recently observed the problem of inmate radicalisation within its prison system. Instead of opting for outright segregation, the Danish authorities have decided to remove prisoners they believe are vulnerable to influence while maintaining interactions between extremists and inmates deemed essentially resistant. This is clearly not a fail-safe plan, and there would need to be thorough profiles of those involved, yet given the right conditions and context it could well be a promising strategy.

Indonesia – New Plan, New Leader: Fresh Start?

Authorities in Indonesia are well aware of the dispersal-segregation dilemma. Head of the BNPT's de-radicalisation division, Dr Irfan Idris, has been quoted in the media encapsulating the drawbacks of each approach. There have been reported cases of prisoners and even guards succumbing to the influence of charismatic extremists behind bars in Indonesia, yet authorities are concerned that a segregation model would allow militants to close ranks, as witnessed in Belfast's Maze Prison.

The specialised centre in Sentul was close to realisation in 2014, when a memorandum of understanding was signed between the BNPT and the Ministry of Law and Human Rights to begin transferring prisoners. However, a subsequent visit by then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono scuppered the plans, as the former leader expressed apprehension about the facility's proximity to the capital.

Yudhoyono also warned that the centre "must not be like Guantanamo" and the fact that proponents have claimed the current scheme merely involves a counselling facility for "ex-terrorists" appears to be aimed at extenuating this type of attribution.

Newly appointed Head of the BNPT Insp. Gen. Tito Karnavian has stated that prevention and rehabilitation are the agency's primary functions, and the new chief (who has a strong academic background in these areas) suggested he intends to prioritise the management of extremist inmates to mitigate risk and target interventions more appropriately.

If the Sentul plan goes ahead and is well managed – both internally to prevent undesired unity and externally to placate public perception – it could provide an opportunity at long last to establish a robust disengagement programme in Indonesia, while avoiding the problem of general inmate radicalisation.

The potential benefits outweigh the possible risks.

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