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Abu Bakar Bashir's Imprisonment: What Next?

By Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Nur Azlin Yasin

Synopsis

The conviction of Abu Bakar Bashir is an important milestone in the fight against violent radicals in Indonesia. However, its effect on the radicalisation problem on the ground may not be significant unless Bashir's influence within and outside the prison is curbed.

Commentary

INDONESIAN RADICAL cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, 72, was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment after being convicted of financing and mobilising a terrorist group in Aceh, northern Sumatra. The group, called Tandzim Al Qaeda Serambi Mekkah (Al Qaeda Organisation in the Verandah of Makkah) was a loose coalition of militants who had planned the assassination of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and attacks on foreign targets such as the United States and Australian embassies. The group's operational capability has been disrupted since the Indonesian authorities' closure of its military camp in a remote area of Aceh in early 2010.

The arrests of members of this group had provided evidence of Bashir's financial and motivational support for the group. The arrested members testified that Bashir watched a video of the Aceh military training -- evidence that funds provided by him were used for military purposes.

Legal Milestone

Bashir and his supporters have countered that the sentence on him was an act of repression against Islam by the Indonesian authorities to curry favour with the United States and Australia. Days before the verdict, bomb threats against 36 locations were issued via text messages and Twitter. Thousands of police and soldiers were deployed to ensure security throughout Indonesia; the police presence was especially tight in and around the court compound where hundreds of Bashir's supporters gathered to hear the verdict on 16 June 2011.

Although the sentence is far shorter than the life term sought by the prosecutors, the conviction is another milestone in the fight against terrorism by the Indonesian authorities. It shows Indonesia's commitment to pursue this fight despite the burgeoning pressure and threats from the Islamist extremist groups in the country. However, the fight is not over. The government needs to counter Bashir's influence and the problem of radicalisation with comprehensive follow-up measures.

The incarceration of Bashir will have little effect if his radical ideas continue to be disseminated. Indonesian prisons are known to be lax in their enforcement of rules and regulations which have led to the recruitment of criminals in prisons into the ranks of terrorists. Furthermore, convicted terrorists such as Imam Samudera, Ali

Ghufron and Amrozi were able to release statements both online and offline while they were behind bars. Muhammad Jibriel, administrator of Islamist extremist online site arrahmah.com, continues to garner support for himself through emotional and motivational poems posted in his Facebook account.

Indeed the imprisonment of those terrorists has elevated their status among the militants and their sympathisers and further reinforced the community's perception that the Indonesian government was oppressing Islam. The recruitment and indoctrination of criminal inmates to become ideologically motivated terrorists will continue to grow if prison security, rules and regulations are not strengthened dramatically. For instance Aman Abdurrahman recruited several criminal inmates to join Tandzim Al Qaeda Serambi Mekkah.

The Indonesian prison authorities would need to monitor Basir closely to ensure that he does not propagate his radical views further while in prison. They must ensure that he is physically isolated from other inmates and that he has no access to mobile phones and computers – the ideal methods for communicating with supporters and disseminating views.

Tackling Radicalisation in Indonesia

The imprisonment of Bashir will not end radicalisation, militancy and terrorism anymore than did the execution of the Bali bombers and killing of Dulmatin and Noordin Top by security forces. Jemaah Islamiyah's extremism is deeply rooted because of historical, colonial, political and socio-economic circumstances. Not surprisingly, JI's roots in the anti-colonial struggle and later in the opposition to Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime have generated much sympathy among mainstream Muslims.

Greater trust between the government and the community would reduce the current tolerance among sections of the public for radicalism. Such trust cannot be built just by dialogues and community engagement; the government must formulate and implement concrete socio-economic measures to decrease poverty, unemployment, corruption and revamp the public welfare system. Such improvements will help to deradicalise a person who bears grievances against the Indonesian government.

Broader fight not over

Also, the production of extremist materials will not cease with the incarceration of Bashir. Firstly, these materials are readily available online, as well as in bookshops and stalls on the ground in Indonesia. Secondly, Bashir who belongs to the older generation of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), is not the only radical preacher in Indonesia. Abu Jibriel who is responsible for the establishment of JI in Singapore is still giving sermons in Indonesian mosques.

There is also the younger generation of JI such as Muhammad Jibriel and Abdul Rohim -- sons of Abu Jibriel and Abu Bakar Bashir respectively -- ready to continue their fathers' teachings. In this regard counter ideology remains essential in Indonesia to neutralise the continuous flow of Islamist extremist perspectives in the country.

Bashir's trial and sentence may be a milestone for Indonesia in showing its commitment against terrorism. However, the government needs to contain Bashir's influence so as to effectively counter the spread of radicalisation and Islamist extremism in the protracted fight against terrorism.

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