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ISIL, a Growing Threat in Indonesia?

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Gwenaël Njoto-Feillard, Visiting Fellow at the Institute of South-East Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore, explains that “Stronger cooperation between the state and all elements of Islamic civil society is needed to reinforce the relative resilience of Indonesian Islam to the growth of radicalism”

Like other parts of the Muslim World, Jakarta has been confronted by the growth of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, now renamed “Islamic State” - IS). For months, the organization has been trying to recruit new members in Indonesia, which is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world. IS members have infiltrated a number of local mosques and made fiery speeches in support of jihad in the Middle East. It is estimated that so far, dozens of Indonesian nationals have travelled to Syria and Iraq. As terrorism expert Sidney Jones rightly notes, the danger that these militants pose to Indonesia will only become apparent upon their return, possibly in a few years’ time, when they have accumulated combat experience, skills in explosives, and an international network of contacts.¹ In July, the Indonesian authorities reacted decisively by making a number of arrests and by banning the organization. They have also started working with Muslim clerics to convince local communities that IS’ objectives contradict Islam’s message of peace.

For the general public, the IS issue is reminiscent of the troubled period of the 2000s, when Indonesia witnessed a string of devastating terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Jemaah Islamiyah, at a moment when the country was still struggling to recover from the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The Indonesian police managed to operate a suppressive campaign against the militants, throwing dozens in prison and sending the rest on the run. As a result, JI militants lost a great part of their organizational capacity and ended up operating in small autonomous groups. With limited resources, they chose to concentrate on isolated members of the police. In this context, the Islamic State’s recent successes in the Middle East have been perceived as a welcome development by some radical circles, one that could embolden the local jihadists and allow new recruitment.

However, things have changed since the 2000s. First of all, the chaos currently affecting parts of the Middle East – covered daily on Indonesian TV – is acting as a strong deterrent for public opinion. Furthermore, while Islamic organizations were rather unclear on the nature of JI in the 2000s (many believed that radical Islam was an ideological construct of the West in order to discredit Islam), they have now adopted a definite position on the IS issue, i.e. that its ultra-violence is unacceptable and that its transnational objective of building a global Islamic caliphate is incompatible with the national framework in which Indonesian Islam is anchored. With the exception of Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, part of the Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid

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¹ Allison Jackson, “What does the Islamic State’s rise mean for Indonesia?”, GlobalPost.com, 28 August, 2014.

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(JAT)², and other small radical groups, a majority of the Indonesian Islamic landscape, from moderates to conservatives, have condemned IS. Some local communities have even taken matters into their own hands by retaking mosques that had been infiltrated by IS activists. The fact that IS intends to destroy all symbols of local Islamic cultures has probably played a role in this rejection.

Interestingly, the Pancasila³, the philosophical foundation of the state, has been hailed as an ideological safeguard against extremist ideologies such as the one propounded by IS. While the Pancasila was criticized in the early Post-Suharto years because of its use by the regime to contain political Islam, it has made a strong comeback within the national political narrative and is now being used relatively efficiently against IS, even by Muslim organizations.

The recent election of Joko Widodo to the presidency of the Republic could be another important factor in this struggle against violent extremism. Whereas his rival, Prabowo Subianto, showed some affinities with radical Islamic groups, Joko Widodo has clearly expressed his willingness to defend an Islam that is open, tolerant and rejects violence. During the presidential campaign, he made the following statement:

“I am Jokowi, part of an Islam that is a ‘blessing for all mankind’ (rahmatan lill alamin). An Islam that lives through heritage of and works through the Indonesian Republic, and holds firmly to the 1945 Constitution. ‘Unity in diversity’ (the national motto of Indonesia) is a gift from God... I am not part of that Islam that tramples other religions. I am not part of that Islam that is arrogant and draws the sword to hand and mouth.... I am not part of that group within Islam that makes, with such ease, his own brother an heretic” (May 24, 2014).

In the country’s recent history, this was the first time that such an important political figure, coming from a “secular-nationalist” party (PDIP), had dared speak so boldly in defense of moderate Islam, while directly attacking the radicals’ destructive logic. Jokowi’s Indonesia will face many challenges in confronting IS. As shown by the JI years, it only takes a few ideologically committed individuals to wreak havoc. Governmental efforts will require a comprehensive strategy that is not only limited to purely repressive means or de-radicalization programs, but that will also include a more preventive approach. Here, the role of the two largest Islamic organizations of the country, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah, will be key. By occupying the socio-religious space, they have limited the capacity of penetration by radical movements in local communities. NU and Muhammadiyah leaders and grassroots activists also have the Islamic literacy that allows them to counteract the nihilistic arguments of the extremists.

Finally, while socio-economic injustices have offered a fertile ground for potential recruitment, the authorities will also have to find the legal means to stop the spread of hate speech and extremist ideologies that had characterized the last ten years, under President Yudhoyono. Stronger cooperation between the state and all elements of Islamic civil society is thus needed to reinforce the relative resilience of Indonesian Islam to the growth of radicalism. International partners of Indonesia have a stake in seeing the world’s third largest democracy succeed in this endeavor and further promote its tolerant and plural model in the Muslim World.

² The JAT is an off-shoot of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The allegiance by Ba’asyir (the emir of JI) created a schism within the movement.

³ The Pancasila’s first principle is ‘the belief in an almighty God’. Thus, while around 90% of Indonesians are Muslims, Islam does not have a privileged position in this system where the state is religiously neutral.