Memo

Growing Radicalism and Religious Freedom under pressure in Indonesia

Background

This memo will give a brief overview of two unsettling developments in Indonesia: expanding Muslim radicalism and the menacing of religious freedom, especially that of religious minorities.

I. Growing radicalisation

Indonesia has been familiar for decades with radical Islamic movements striving for an Islamic state under Sharia law. Although these groups were suppressed under the rule of both former presidents Sukarno and Suharto, there has been a rise in terror acts after Suharto was forced to leave office in 1998.

One of the causes of this was that, during the Reformation period, there seemed to be no longer any political restrictions to the establishment of (radical-inspired) Muslim organisations. Also, many Muslim activists were released from prison and those living abroad returned to Indonesia. Another cause is the great defeat that Islamic political parties suffered during the 1999 elections. When the Reformation period turned out to be not amenable for political Islam, this movement felt the need for extreme tactics to achieve its goals.

Although only a small number of Indonesians are willing to engage in terrorism, access to terrorist training grounds has increased. Subsequently, ISIS has polarised jihadists in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia. The organisation has, more than any other group, caused fissures within the jihadist community. One of the most important causes for that was the declaration of the Islamic state by al–Baghdadi, a move not supported by all jihadists.

Nonetheless, ISIS attracted hundreds or perhaps even thousands of supporters and provided them justification for extreme violence. In a 2014 survey the Indonesian scholar Al Chaidar, a student on extremist Muslim movements, recorded two million ISIS followers in Indonesia. Yet the Institute of Policy Analysis of Conflict says that the support for the group is limited "to a fringe of a radical fringe". Nevertheless, even a limited number of people can have a detrimental effect on society.

Expanding conservatism

There is also evidence of a growing conservatism in the country. One example is the enforcement of Sharia law in the province of Aceh. It also seems that Indonesian mosques that adhere to conservative ideology have been receiving Saudi funding, and more Indonesian women in urban areas now wear visible Islamic symbols like the veil.

Social media

Another danger lies in the area of social media. Indonesia is one of the most cyber-connected places on Earth. Therefore, its undereducated youth is potentially susceptible to social media campaigns from ISIS. One way that this risk has already manifested itself is the rise in the number of Indonesian women seeking online marriages with fighters in Syria, in the hopes of raising children in an 'Islamic State'.

Numerous groups

There are numerous terrorist groups in Indonesia which can be aligned in pro-ISIS groups and pro-al-Qaeda (anti-ISIS) groups.

On the pro-ISIS side, the major support groups are:
- Jemmah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT)
- East Indonesia Mujahidin (EIM)
- Jamaah Tauhid wal Jihad (JTJ)
- Jemmah Anshorut Daulah (JAD)

- Ring Banten
- Gema Salam
- Mujahidin Indonesia Barat (MIB)
- Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam (FAKSI)

On the pro-al-Qaeda side, the major support groups are:

- Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)
- Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI)
- Jamaah Anshorul Syariah (JAS)

Today, however, ISIS in Indonesia has taken over the space once dominated by JI and al-Qaeda affiliates.

There are now 22 local groups that have pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and they form a greater threat than the pro al-Qaeda groups. They seem to work independently from each other as splinter groups. They do not merely aim for westerners, foreigners or western symbols, as in the past. Since 2010, the attacks have also focused on symbols of the Indonesian State, especially police officers.

Syrian foreign fighters

Another problem the Indonesian government must be aware of is the return of Syrian foreign fighters that are being trained as jihadists, developing lethal competencies before returning to Indonesia. The number of Indonesian citizens fighting in Syria is not exactly known. The Indonesian government estimated in 2015 that the number was 159, yet some reports claimed that Indonesia was the ISIS fighters' largest supplier in Southeast Asia. Regardless of the number, the return of these fighters might cause similar problems as those who returned from Afghanistan in the '80s and '90s of the last century—some of whom were responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing.

A main problem in this context is that Indonesia does not have a consistent law in place to prevent its citizenry from travelling to Syria to join ISIS or to return to Indonesia after fighting there. Currently, there are no signs that fighters are sent back to Indonesia to start jihad but, the longer they are in Syria, the greater the chances are they will come back for that purpose.

To date, hundreds of Indonesians who went to Syria and the Middle East to join ISIS have returned home. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 210 Indonesians were deported in 2015 from six countries because they allegedly wanted to join ISIS or were a member of ISIS.

II. Religious freedom and blasphemy cases

As a consequence of the rise of radical political Islam, religious freedom has come under pressure. An important indicator is the rise of blasphemy cases. Since Suharto fell from power in 1998, there have been increasingly more of these types of cases. The Setara Institute, a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that conducts advocacy and research on religious and political freedom, reported 70 cases of government abuses of religious freedom between January and August 2015.

Criminalising blasphemy and other forms of perceived religious insults continue to be used against individuals. Blasphemy is also often used by groups and organisations as a way to put social and political pressure on opponents. It has been reported that local government and police have given in to pressure from radical groups. The case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama is one of the most famous and recent examples.

Most of the blasphemy cases after 1998 evolve around the issue of free speech and expression and newly formed religious movements. According to Setara Research Director Ismail Hasani, this is influenced by political factors which take advantage of a more nonchalant political climate i.e. groups take advantage of the law for their own political gain. He said that blasphemy cases are on the rise, because religion is the

easiest element to be taken advantage of, especially in establishing a new political power. This abuse is placing increased pressure on minorities. Even though the blasphemy law applies to all of the six officially recognised religions, most prosecutions are brought against people accused of blaspheming Islam.

While we applaud the efforts of the central government to reaffirm constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, to promote tolerance, and prevent religiously motivated violence, it can be noted that it did not do enough to intervene at the local level. Local governments selectively have enforced blasphemy laws and implemented local regulations in ways that impacted various religious groups. Police also did not always actively investigate and prosecute crimes among hard-line Islamic groups.

Specific religious groups that are targeted are, for example, Gafatar, Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Intolerance towards these minority groups is on the rise. According to research by Setara Institute, in 2016 there were 208 incidents or events recorded that contained violations towards freedom of religion or belief resulting in 270 violent actions. Additional research conducted by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in 2016 found that incidents of discrimination against religious minorities and attacks on religious properties continue to occur in Indonesia.

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