

Security Implications of COVID-19 for Indonesia

V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohman

Synopsis

The COVID-19 pandemic has inadvertently had a significant impact on Indonesia's terrorism landscape. On the one hand, it has put the brakes on consolidation efforts among pro-Islamic State (IS) local groups. On the other, it has also increased the risk of prison breaks and uprisings. On the counter-terrorism front, police operations to arrest suspects may continue with caution but ongoing trials to prosecute terrorist offenders, as well as deradicalisation programmes have faced disruptions.

Threat Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a mixed impact on pro-IS groups' indoctrination and recruitment efforts in Indonesia. There have been some calls for opportunistic attacks, with the government seen as weakened as it comes to grips with a brewing domestic health crisis. Anti-Chinese rhetoric has also been ramped up on extremist channels. Although discussions are still largely confined to racist discourses and target lists, experts caution some pro-IS supporters may exploit the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to expand their actual targeting beyond police officials to include domestic and international Chinese targets.¹

In framing the pandemic, pro IS militants believe that only God, and not the virus, which they claim as God's creation, should be feared. Moreover, in line with their view that the government is an "apostate" ruler, pro-IS groups also generally reject the government's call for social or physical distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19, albeit with some exceptions.

Indoctrination Activity, Training Programmes, and Attacks

At an operational level, pro-IS groups based in Java such as Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) and Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK) continue to engage in ideological indoctrination activities through closed-door religious study sessions. Some pro-IS group leaders have also ramped up efforts to provide social safety nets for their members and families, through the distribution of food and other basic needs. Given many communities have fallen into economic hardship, such outreach efforts can often harden ideological commitment to the group's cause.

Some JAD and JAK members have, however, opted to suspend portions of *i'dad* (training) because their training venues, including archery fields and hiking trails, have been shut due to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, training programmes that can be conducted at home, such as developing bomb-making skills, will likely continue. Meanwhile, the administrators of some home-based pro-IS schools that indoctrinate the children of pro-IS supporters, have opted to observe government guidelines on social distancing, by temporarily closing them, likely to reduce the risk of pro-IS children being infected.

In Sulawesi, the pro-IS Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia/MIT) group has continued to launch attacks. The latest incident on April 15 saw two MIT militants shoot a police officer and attempt to rob the latter of his rifle in the town of Poso (Central Sulawesi). Police then chased the attackers, who had escaped on motorbike, and killed them in an ensuing gun battle.²

¹ "IPAC Short Briefing No. 1: COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia", *IPAC*, 2 April 2020.

² "Baku Tembak di Poso, 2 Anggota MIT Tewas, 1 Polisi Terluka", *Benarnews*, April 15, 2020,

<https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/mit-poso-militer-04152020142723.html>.

Officials later said the two men, who were found with vest bombs strapped to their bodies, had been on a police wanted list for their involvement in terrorist activities.³

Consolidation Efforts

Efforts to consolidate linkages between terrorist inmates and militant networks appear to have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. This is partly because the country's Directorate General of Corrections (Ditjen PAS) has suspended prison visits.⁴ Such restrictions are significant, given prisons have long been hotbeds of radicalisation in Indonesia. The practice of visiting terrorist inmates by their extremist counterparts based outside the prisons is a regular occurrence, and remains a key part of threat groups' strategy to ensure the inmates' continued commitment to their cause. They also play a critical role in keeping intact pro-IS networks in Indonesia, and helped bring together a network of autonomously run pro-IS cells that morphed into the JAD, currently the largest pro-IS group in the country.

Prison visits have also been instrumental in providing "spiritual" support for specific terrorist attacks.⁵ Prior to 2016, many operatives involved in JAD-linked attacks were known to have visited prominent radical clerics Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Aman Abdurrahman in Nusa Kambangan Correctional Facilities (LAPAS) in Cilacap, Central Java, to gain ideological affirmation. JAD leader and operatives such as Suryadi

Mas'ud and Saiful Muhtorir alias Abu Gar, also visited Iwan Darmawan Munto, alias Rois⁶, for technical guidance in preparation for the Jakarta attacks of January 2016.

While key radicals have been moved to maximum security facilities or isolated cells to curtail their influence, contact between inmates and pro-IS networks outside is known to persist in other prisons with lesser security controls. For instance, several former terrorist inmates who remain radicalised, such as Sulthon Qolbi and Joko Jihad, have conducted a series of prison visits aimed at consolidating the pro-IS movement in prison.⁷ However, such activities could be curtailed in the short term, due to the recent restrictions placed on prison visits.

Prison Breaks

Renewed concerns of prison breaks or uprisings have also emerged⁸ with prison authorities – already understaffed – being stretched to the brink and unrest growing among inmates in some prisons. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in correctional facilities, Ditjen PAS has, to date, released 36,554 criminal inmates – out of around 50,000 – eligible for parole.⁹ Terrorist offenders, drug dealers, and corruption cases inmates were excluded from eligibility given the gravity of their offences.¹⁰ Aggrieved with the government's decision, there has been online chatter among IS supporters calling for Abu Bakar Ba'asyir to be released from prison by "war". Earlier this month, Ba'asyir – despite

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Ditjen PAS Tunda Penerimaan Tahanan Baru di Lapas/Rutan Karena Corona", *Kompas*, March 31, 2020. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/31/20092101/ditjen-pas-tunda-penerimaan-tahanan-baru-di-lapas-rutan-karena-corona?page=1>.

⁵ Muh Taufiqurrohman, Muhammad Ali Usman, and Ardi Putra, "Why Terrorism Breeds in Indonesian Prisons", *Today Online*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/why-terrorism-breeds-indonesian-prisons>.

⁶ Rois was sentenced to death in a Jakarta court for his major role in planning and executing the Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta in 2004.

⁷ "Lembaga Amal Pendukung Terorisme", *PAKAR*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.radicalismstudies.org/1451/2020/01/9-lembaga-amal-pendukung-terorisme.html>.

⁸ "IPAC Short Briefing No. 1: COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia", *IPAC*, 2 April 2020.

⁹ "Kemenkumham Telah Bebaskan 36.554 Napi di Tengah Wabah Corona", *CNN*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200411155847-20-492629/kemenkumham-telah-bebaskan-36554-napi-di-tengah-wabah-corona>; "Radical Indonesian Cleric Bashir Asks for Early Release from Prison", *The Straits Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/radical-cleric-bashir-asks-for-early-release-from-prison-says-age-puts-him-in-covid-19>.

¹⁰ Criminal inmates eligible for early release are those who have completed 2/3 of their sentences or half of their sentences for juvenile inmates. See: "30 Ribu Napi Bebas Penjara Karena Corona, Banyak dari Sumatra Utara", *Suara.com*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.suara.com/news/2020/04/01/142258/30-ribu-napi-bebas-penjara-karena-corona-banyak-dari-sumatara-utara>; "Dibebaskan karena Wabah Virus Corona, Perasaan Napi Senang Campur Gundah", *Kompas*, April 3, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/03/11354091/dibebaskan-karena-wabah-virus-corona-perasaan-napi-senang-campur-gundah>.

citing old age and concern over the spread of COVID-19 in prison¹¹ – had another request for an early release turned down by the authorities.

The frequent calls by transnational militant networks such as Al Qaeda and IS to “free Muslim prisoners” (mostly militants serving time for committing terrorist acts) have been mirrored in the Indonesian extremist community over the last decade. These calls have mostly manifested through participation in rallies, the erection of banners, and spread of online discourses, calling for the release of prominent militants such as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and Aman Abdurrahman from prison.

To date, episodes of prison breaks and uprisings have been mostly orchestrated by terrorist inmates from within, rather than by outsiders. These include the Tanjung Gusta Correctional Facility riot in Medan, North Sumatra, in July 2013, which saw 15 prison officers taken hostage by rioters. Two of them eventually died.¹² More than two hundred inmates also escaped, nine of whom were terrorists, although the latter were all subsequently re-arrested by the end of that year.¹³ The second incident involved the Mako Brimob riot in May 2018, that resulted in five police fatalities.¹⁴

One of the factors that had provoked the Tanjung Gusta riot was disappointment over a then new government decree that tightened the remission (sentence reduction) process

for serious offenders (including terrorist inmates) issued a month prior.¹⁵ Similarly, a key demand for the Mako Brimob rioters had been better treatment for terrorist inmates in Nusa Kambangan.¹⁶

The exclusion of terrorist and drug dealer inmates from the recently announced early release prison programme could trigger renewed unrest, given growing fears of a possible coronavirus outbreak in several overcrowded prisons. Prison riots in Maesa Prison, Palu (Central Sulawesi) on March 31 and another in Tuminting Prison, Manado (North Sulawesi) on April 11, were partly instigated by these exclusions.¹⁷ The possibility of criminal (particularly drug dealers) and terrorist inmates joining forces to stage a riot akin to the Tanjung Gusta riot of 2013 takes on an added dimension, given JAD and JAK inmates continue to recruit new members within the prisons. Several could be mobilised by them to stage further riots.

Implications on Counter Terrorism

Arrests and Trials

The COVID-19 outbreak has not deterred the anti-terror police unit Detachment 88 from conducting counter terrorism operations, where necessary. Early this month, it arrested four members of a JAD cell in Southeast Sulawesi. Separately, the police were also involved in a series of shootouts with MIT

¹¹ The government has considered releasing corruption inmates who are above 60 years old and have served two thirds of their sentences. However, early release for old terrorist inmates due to COVID-19 is unlikely particularly for inmates who have refused to participate in deradicalisation programmes.

¹² “Korban Tewas Kerusuhan LP Tanjung Gusta 2 Sipir dan 3 Napi”, *Liputan 6*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/637313/korban-tewas-kerusuhan-lp-tanjung-gusta-2-sipir-dan-3-napi>.

¹³ “Buron Terakhir Napi Teroris Lapas Tanjung Gusta Ditangkap”, *Republika*, December 3, 2013, (<https://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/mx83xy/buron-terakhir-napi-teroris-lapas-tanjung-gusta-ditangkap>); “Napi Teroris yang Kabur dari Tanjung Gusta Tinggal 4 Orang”, *Berita Satu*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/125382/napi-teroris-yang-kabur-dari-tanjung-gusta-tinggal-4-orang>; “Napi Provokator Rusuh Tanjung Gusta Dipindah ke Nusakambangan”, *Liputan6*, July 31, 2013, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/654026/napi-provokator-rusuh-tanjung-gusta-dipindah-ke-nusakambangan>.

[provokator-rusuh-tanjung-gusta-dipindah-ke-nusakambangan](https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/654026/napi-provokator-rusuh-tanjung-gusta-dipindah-ke-nusakambangan).

¹⁴ “One Inmate, Five Police Officers Killed in Jail Riot in Indonesia”, *The Straits Times*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/one-inmate-five-police-officers-killed-in-jail-riot-in-indonesia>.

¹⁵ “4 Indikasi Penyebab Rusuh Tanjung Gusta”, *Tempo*, July 14, 2013, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/496263/4-indikasi-penyebab-rusuh-tanjung-gusta/full&view=ok>.

¹⁶ “Rekaman Negosiasi Aman Abdurrahman & Wakil Tahanan Mako Brimob”, *Tirto.id*, May 11, 2018, <https://tirto.id/rekaman-negosiasi-aman-abdurrahman-wakil-tahanan-mako-brimob-cKec>.

¹⁷ “Rutan Maesa Rusuh, 10 Napi Dipindahkan”, *Metro Sulawesi*, April 1, 2020, <http://metrosulawesi.id/2020/04/01/rutan-maesa-rusuh-10-napi-dipindahkan/>; “Lapas Tuminting di Manado Rusuh, Napi Mengamuk Hingga Bakar Bangunan”, *Kumparan*, April 11, 2020, <https://kumparan.com/manadobacirita/lapas-tuminting-di-manado-rusuh-napi-menga-muk-hingga-bakar-bangunan-1tCfAwC8T5T>.

operatives in Poso.¹⁸ Surveillance will need to be stepped up further over pro-IS groups around Ramadhan (the Muslim fasting month), which will start on April 24. IS supporters regard Ramadhan as a month of 'conquest and plunder' and, in recent years, have conducted several attacks during this period. They include the July 2016 suicide attack on the Surakarta Police headquarters (Central Java), the May 2017 suicide bombings in East Jakarta, the May 2018 attack on the North Sumatra police headquarters and the 2018 church bombings in Surabaya (East Java).¹⁹

The continued spread of COVID-19 has a two-fold implication on the existing ability of the authorities to carry out their arrests and prosecutions. For one, when conducting arrests, and particularly around districts with relatively high numbers of COVID-19 cases, resources should be deployed to ensure Detachment 88 officials are equipped with adequate protective gear, given there have been calls for IS supporters who have been infected with COVID-19 to spread it to the *thaghut* (usually refers to police officers).²⁰

For another, ongoing trial sessions to convict terrorist detainees have been conducted through online video conferencing to ensure safe distancing measures are in place. Judges, prosecutors and defence lawyers are usually based in Jakarta district courts; the defendants remain in their detention centres; meanwhile, witnesses are based in district courts in their respective cities of origin. Yet, these trial sessions have faced some disruptions due to slow internet connections.

Deradicalisation Programmes

COVID-19 has also disrupted ongoing deradicalisation programmes conducted in Indonesia's correctional facilities. Restrictions placed on visitors in these facilities have also applied to personnel from entities that run

deradicalisation programmes, such as Detachment 88, the National Anti-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) and various NGOs. This means that a total of 117 inmates – 48 of them are in Nusa Kambangan – whom the government announced as being "deradicalised",²¹ are at risk of being re-radicalised amidst the present "lockdown" (a term used by extremists to describe the prison visit ban). Prison lockdowns risk isolating inmates who may have been on a positive path and may also negatively impact prison social dynamics, especially if the "deradicalised" inmates are housed in the same compound as more ideologically hardened ones.

Recommendations

Pro-IS groups in Indonesia will likely attempt to conduct attacks amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite the apparent targeting of the Chinese community in their discourse, the primary target of attacks will remain police officers, against whom pro-IS militants seek revenge for the deaths and arrests of their fellow operatives. Similarly, stabbing and low-tech bomb attacks are a more likely prospect than local terrorists seeking to weaponise the COVID-19 virus, akin to far-right groups in the West.

In the near term, Indonesian counter terrorism agencies should adapt and reorient their counter-measures as circumstances evolve, particularly in dealing with the arrest of terrorist offenders and the subsequent processes of their prosecution and incarceration. Specific to the latter, while some correctional facilities have taken steps to address the overcrowding issue in their facilities, this is still not the case in various detention centres (*rutan*) that are manned by the prosecutor offices and police. The latter facilities are generally used to house detainees prior to their convictions. The government should consider housing these

¹⁸ "Polri Sebut Empat Terduga Teroris di Sultra Jaringan JAD", *CNN Indonesia*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200415001058-12-493615/polri-sebut-empat-terduga-teroris-di-sultra-jaringan-jad>; "Baku Tembak dengan Satgas Tinombala, 1 Anggota KSB di Poso Tewas", *Detik*, April 10, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4972842/baku-tembak-dengan-satgas-tinombala-1-anggota-ksb-di-poso-tewas>; "Baku Tembak di Poso, 2 Anggota MIT Tewas, 1 Polisi Terluka", *Op.Cit.*

¹⁹ "Rentetan Bom dan Aksi Terorisme Selama Ramadhan di Indonesia", *CNN Indonesia*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190604110800-20-400871/rentetan-bom-dan-aksi-terorisme-selama-ramadan-di-indonesia>.

²⁰ Informatics Report, ICPVTR, March 2020.

²¹ "Mahfud: 117 Napi Terorisme Ikut Deradikalisasi di Tahun 2020", *Inews*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.inews.id/news/nasional/mahfud-117-napi-terorisme-ikut-deradikalisasi-di-tahun-2020>.

detainees temporarily in other facilities to avoid further overcrowding in these detention centres. This is particularly important should there be significant numbers of further arrests, and given correctional facilities have also now ceased accepting newly convicted inmates.²²

Amidst the ongoing pandemic, some other measures the authorities could consider include: conduct rapid COVID-19 tests in pockets of areas populated by IS supporters (given the calls to infect the police); work closely with internet service providers to ensure faster broadband speeds so that terrorism trials can run smoothly; collaborate with correctional facility authorities to ensure minimal disruptions to deradicalisation programmes for terrorist offender inmates; and finally, significantly buffer resources in the generally under-staffed prisons across the country that house terrorist inmates to prevent potential prison uprisings. Through such measures, disruptions in the country's counter-terrorism strategy, as it grapples with the devastating impact of COVID-19, can at least be minimised.

V. Arianti is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Muh Taufiqurrohman is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalisation Studies (PAKAR), an NGO based in Indonesia.

²² "Ditjen PAS Tunda Penerimaan Tahanan Baru di Lapas Rutan Karena Corona", Op.Cit.