

COVID-19 and Extremism in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: *Violent extremism in Southeast Asia did not increase as a result of Covid-19 despite exhortations from ISIS leaders to attack, nor was counter-terrorism capacity seriously undermined by the need to divert funds and personnel. Fears remained that the pandemic might increase interest in biological weapons or cyber-attacks; create a favourable climate for recruitment as economic hardship deepened; or lead to prison uprisings. Of these the concern about prisons was most justified.*

As of July 2020, the impact of COVID-19 on extremism in Southeast Asia was less than initially feared, but the potential for repercussions remain. A few attacks in Indonesia and the Philippines were directly attributable to local pro-ISIS groups seeking to take advantage of what they perceived as a virus-induced weakness of the enemy, but they barely caused a ripple beyond the immediate local context. There was some increased anti-Chinese rhetoric as a result of the virus's Chinese origins, but no more among violent extremist groups than among conservative Islamists more generally, and not of a level to constitute incitement to violence. One prison riot in Indonesia was the direct outcome of inmates' fear of the virus, but it did not involve convicted terrorists; nevertheless, concern about extremists in prison continues. The pandemic has possibly added one more reason for the reluctance of governments in the region to repatriate nationals in camps in northeast Syria controlled by the predominantly Kurdish

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and one more obstacle to any plans for foreign fighters to return home through unofficial channels. If the first six months of the virus in Southeast Asia did not affect violent extremism in a significant way, what of the future?

Worldwide, these are the fears: that an economic downturn and distrust of government caused by COVID-19 could produce a more hospitable environment for extremist recruitment; that the pandemic could inspire new efforts at bio-terrorism; that more people working online could increase the likelihood of cyberattacks and more interest in other technologies, such as drones and robots; that extremist groups could step up fundraising in the name of humanitarian and charitable activities to help COVID-19 victims; and that there could be new efforts to liberate prisoners (Cruickshank and Ressler, 2020). To assess whether any of these fears could materialize in Southeast Asia, we must consider the capacities and intentions of violent extremists in the region.

The Status of Violent Extremism in Early 2020

In Southeast Asia, the extremist groups that have been the primary cause for concern have been violent Islamists, although they are not the only ones interested in exploiting the pandemic. The Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, have been trying to use economic distress to boost recruitment. Both it and several ethno-nationalist insurgencies, from the BRN in southern Thailand to the Free

Papua Movement, responded to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's appeal to end conflict during the pandemic to press for ceasefires or negotiations (Pacific Media Watch, 2020; Rakkanam and Ahmad, 2020).

The focus on Islamists stems from the cross-border nature of Islamist violence, especially after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) in 2013-2014. The attraction of the new "caliphate," the extraordinary use it made of a decentralized, social media-based propaganda campaign, and the belief of militant Muslims around the world that it was the fulfilment of Islamic prophecies combined to exert a strong pull on Southeast Asian Islamists (IPAC, 2016, 2017). Between 2013 and 2020, over 1,000 Indonesians tried to leave to join ISIS, though many were stopped en route, some before leaving Indonesia but most in Turkey, where they were generally deported, debriefed, given a few weeks "rehabilitation," and then allowed to return home. The Indonesian government began a more systematic detention of deportees on arrival in late 2017. As of mid-2019, 554 Indonesians had been deported from the Middle East, almost all of whom were from Turkey and pro-ISIS, though a few had been planning to make contact with or deliver aid to non-ISIS militias (IPAC 2018). Only a trickle arrived thereafter. In addition, well over 100 Indonesians had been killed and several hundred others, mostly women and children, had ended up in the SDF camps. Some top Indonesian ISIS fighters and fundraisers were being held in SDF prisons. It was the possibility that these men could escape or try to return home that worried authorities in the region. Malaysian figures were much smaller - some 120 Malaysians had left for Syria by 2020, of whom 48 were killed and 11 returned while just over 50 remained in Syria, among them 19 adult males (Royal Malaysian Police, 2020). Only a handful of nationals from Singapore, the Philippines, or other Southeast Asian countries

were ever identified as jihadis. In late 2019, a debate flared briefly among Indonesian agencies and in local media over whether to repatriate both women and children, or just children, or just unaccompanied children under the age of 10. There was clearly no enthusiasm for the repatriation idea within the political elite or general public, and the COVID-19 outbreak and accompanying travel restrictions have effectively quashed the idea.



Young Indonesian woman (right) who left with her family to join ISIS in 2015 and as of mid-2019 was trapped with her grandmother in al-Hol camp with no prospect of getting home (Photo from BBC).

In the meantime, ISIS's exhortation to its followers to wage war at home if they could not join the battle in Syria continued to inspire Indonesians, Malaysians, and Filipinos, even after the last ISIS stronghold in Baghouz, Syria fell in March 2019. All violent Islamist attacks in Indonesia from 2014 through the end of June 2020 were committed by ISIS supporters, though not by any single organization. While the two best-known of the Indonesian pro-ISIS groups were Jamaah Anshorud Daulah (JAD)

and the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, MIT, in central Sulawesi), most of the attempted attacks by late 2019 were being carried out by small autonomous cells. Anti-ISIS groups, notably Jemaah Islamiyah, continued to be active and sent cadres to train with the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, but they view violence in Indonesia and elsewhere in the region as counterproductive.

In the Philippines, it was harder to sort out the difference between local feuds, insurgent attacks, criminal operations, and terrorism, but from 2014 onwards the highest-profile attacks, including the extraordinary five-month takeover in 2017 of Marawi, a city in the Mindanao province of Lanao del Sur, were all ISIS-linked. A coalition of at least five organizations, joined by an unknown number of foreign fighters, formed “East Asia Wilayah” in 2016 in a bid to become a formally-recognized province of Islamic State (IPAC 2017). The recognition only came belatedly in August 2018.

Before COVID-19 struck, fears from terrorism were twofold: that the West’s role in ISIS defeats and the death of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi would lead to new attacks on foreigners, and that the low capacity of would-be terrorists, particularly in Indonesia, might be significantly upgraded by the return of foreign fighters from Syria. Neither of these fears had materialized by early 2020. Few foreign fighters returned, and those who did were generally either uninterested in returning to violence or were caught on arrival as deportees and imprisoned. Targeting remained overwhelmingly local, focused on police and Christian churches.

COVID-19 Arrives

When the pandemic first erupted in China in December 2019-January 2020, the reaction of

ISIS central was that this was divine retribution for China’s treatment of Muslim Uighurs (Daemon, Criezis, 2020). As the virus moved on to Europe in February and March 2020, just as the first anniversary of the fall of Baghouz was approaching, the narrative of divine retribution expanded to include the West. Even as ISIS was urging its fighters to be careful about travel, it was exhorting its followers to attack while the enemy was weak. One message disseminated as the outbreak in Italy dominated the headlines in late March read:

If COVID-19 could speak, maybe it would say, “We’ve got the Vatican surrounded, what more are you waiting for?” So why are we keeping quiet, corona has opened the way for us, shoulder-to-shoulder, let’s attack them! (IPAC 2020a)

The Indonesian group MIT that had at one time called itself the “armed forces of Islamic State in Indonesia,” was the only one to take heed. Under its leader Ali Kalora, the small band of some 10 to 20 fighters decided that the virus was an ally, sent to kill non-believers and weaken the economies of all states engaged in the war against ISIS (IPAC, 2020).



Ali Kalora (center) in Central Sulawesi 2018 (Source).

Ali Kalora told his followers that victory over the “oppressors” was near and urged them to step up attacks on police and informers. Four such attacks took place in March and April, resulting in the death of two civilians and the acquisition of a few police motorcycles. This may seem more like failure than success, but for a terrorist group that had been the target of massive joint police-military operations since 2016, the fact that it could mount any attacks at all was a demonstration of resilience. MIT, with 14 men and a few guns, remained important symbolically to the pro-ISIS network in Indonesia, but even with COVID-19 as a perceived partner, it had little ability to inflict serious damage.

The pandemic’s impact on security forces was also limited. In the 19 March issue of its online news bulletin *An-Naba*, ISIS central gloated that the coronavirus would “substantially undercut” the enemy’s ability to wage war, perhaps in consideration of budget cuts or redeployment of security forces for other tasks like testing, contact tracing, and police complying with social distancing and other lockdown measures (International Crisis Group, 2020). In Southeast Asia however, counter-terrorism operations continued unabated, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines. Indonesia’s police counter-terrorism unit, Detachment 88, was spared any budgetary or personnel reductions. In the Philippines, police field operations were somewhat hampered by travel restrictions triggered by the virus, but the military in any case remained the lead agency fighting the ISIS network. Its operations, particularly against the Abu Sayyaf Group in Sulu, Basilan, and central Mindanao continued full tilt, with soldiers suffering some horrific casualties in the process (Gotinga, 2020b).

The first six months of the pandemic thus have not changed the dynamics of violent extremism in the region. Three particular future fears are addressed here: prison riots, advanced

weaponry; and increased recruitment.

Prisons

The potential for coronavirus-induced prison uprisings remains a concern, as inmates harbor fears of infection. Prison healthcare is almost always substandard, and restrictions have been imposed in many places on visitors and collective religious activities, including Friday prayers. When inmate discontent over these issues is combined with the ISIS (and more general jihadi) imperative to free fellow mujahidin, the possibility of riots, escapes, or attempted rescues is high (Clifford and Weiss, 2020). Since COVID-19 erupted in Indonesia, there has been only one prison riot directly linked to inmates’ fear of contracting the virus in Manado, North Sulawesi in April 2020. However, no convicted terrorists were involved.

Freeing fellow mujahidin would fit well into the notion of striking while the enemy is weakened. It is easier said than done, however, in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. In Indonesia, prison administration for terrorism suspects and convicts was tightened significantly in the wake of a May 2018 uprising at a police remand centre south of Jakarta, where terrorist suspects were being held. Pro-ISIS inmates took hostages and killed five police officers; one of the inmates also died. Calls across pro-ISIS social media directly from Indonesians in Syria to go to the aid of the rioting detainees led to a rush of efforts to help. Police made dozens of new arrests and also increased security for high-risk offenders, making it difficult for them to talk to each other or have access to hand phones. It would be much more difficult now for Indonesian terrorism suspects to conduct a similar uprising, even with COVID-19 as a trigger.

Furthermore, Indonesia and the Philippines have both released large numbers of ordinary

criminal offenders precisely to reduce the likelihood that the virus would spread in overcrowded prisons. Indonesia released some 30,000 prisoners in April 2020 and the Philippines followed suit with some 10,000 in May. None of those released were convicted terrorists, and the potential for COVID-19 outbreaks may have been somewhat mitigated.

The problem, however, is not just with the prisons in the region, but also with the facilities holding ISIS detainees in northeastern Syria, since what happens there can blow back via extremist social media (Alexander, 2020). Since the pandemic began to spread beyond China there have been at least three riots in prisons run by the SDF in northeastern Syria for ISIS detainees. The first happened on 29 March, and was directly related to fear of COVID-19, despite the fact that at that time (and through the end of June 2020) there were no known cases of the virus. The causes of the riots on 3 May and 30 June were by and large related to the conditions of imprisonment, as well as the unknown length of imprisonment due to the lack of charges or trials. The concern was that measures taken to prevent COVID-19 added to the general discontent and deteriorating security situation in a way that could lead to another mass breakout.

Biological Weapons and Cyber Attacks

The pandemic has brought the world's awareness to the ability of a virus to disrupt humanity's functions across the planet. The fear of a terrorist group developing and using a pathogen remains an ever-present nightmare for many counter-terrorism experts, as does the possibility of use and development of new forms of cyberwarfare. The real likelihood of biological weaponization seems low, as the only threat so far has been one group's discussion of the possibility of trying to deliberately infect the enemy. Otherwise, the capacity for a biological attack seems low, though there are

precedents. Long before ISIS, Asia experienced a nerve gas attack in 1995 when the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo used the deadly sarin gas on the Tokyo underground during the morning rush hour. Jemaah Islamiyah, the organisation best known for the 2002 Bali bombing, tried to produce anthrax in 2001, but never got very far (Joesse and Milward, 2014). In 2011, a strikingly incompetent group of would-be terrorists tried to concoct ricin through online instructions in a plot to poison the police. Not only did they not even get close to producing a serious poison, but their idea of administering it was to doctor a chilli sauce in a cafe frequented by police and hope that one of them would use it.

None of the terrorists arrested in Indonesia or the Philippines in the last decade have shown any capacity for producing biological or chemical weapons, and more importantly, there is little evidence of any desire to do so. Police need to be vigilant, of course, but in the short to medium term, COVID-19's intrusion into the lives of Southeast Asians does not appear to have induced further interest in bioweaponry for terrorist groups. Indonesian ISIS supporters are more likely to look backwards and attempt archery on horseback, a key military skill in the time of the Prophet, than to look forward to new technologies, even if a major upgrade in weaponry is what could make these low-tech, low-competence extremists far more dangerous.

The reliance during COVID-19 lockdowns on online meetings and online education raised concern over a new wave of extremist-linked cyberattacks. Attacks by "cyber-criminals" did indeed increase, including of a police personnel database, but the Southeast Asian perpetrators arrested as of June 2020 had no known extremist links (Arnaz 2020). A recent book examines other technologies that terrorists might employ and looks at how the introduction of new technologies changed terrorism in the past (Kronin, 2019). Smartphones are an

obvious example, but extremists also reportedly used drones for intelligence gathering during the Marawi siege. One worry in mid-2020 was that as Telegram, the message widely used by extremists, gave way to new social media platforms like Threema and Hoot, it might become more difficult to track extremist accounts. However, the shift away from Telegram began before COVID-19 and does not appear to have any relation to the pandemic.

Increased Recruitment During Economic Downturn

Finally, there is the worry that as a coronavirus-linked global economic recession lands in Southeast Asia, Islamist extremists will find fertile recruiting ground for new members. This assumes that poverty is a major driver of radicalisation, a widely-held assumption backed by very little evidence. In the Philippines, poverty has been a factor in the sense that extremists were able to recruit some fighters by offering large recruitment fees, as the leaders of the Marawi did in 2016-17. but there are far too many other factors involved in recruitment into Islamist groups in Mindanao and Sulu for poverty to stand out of the mix. Furthermore, this fails to explain the presence of well-to-do middle class youths among the militants (Chernov Hwang, 2019).

In Indonesia, economic downturns in the past have not produced increased extremist recruitment. The critical factors are instead the appearances of powerful new ideological arguments, with charismatic *ulama*, or religious scholars, promoting them and collective action associated with them. The developments that led to major boosts in recruitment in the past were the Ambon and Poso communal conflicts in 1999 and 2000, the development of a training camp in Aceh in 2010, and the declaration of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2014. The Indonesian groups that have successfully exploited economic

hardship have been more the above-ground pro-syari'ah advocacy and anti-vice groups that have significant constituencies among the urban poor, like the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI). Arguments about income inequality can carry particular weight for disaffected people directly disadvantaged by government policies such as evicted urban squatters (Wilson, 2019).

Conclusion

The first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia did not produce a spike in extremist violence, new kinds of terror, or decreased capacity of counter-terrorism agencies, but the impact of the pandemic will be long-lasting. It will be important to monitor the testimony of newly arrested terrorist suspects in court hearings and elsewhere to see how they portray COVID-19 and any possible attempts to exploit it. There could very well be a delayed reaction as ideas tried elsewhere find their way back to Southeast Asia through pro-ISIS media - and while there aren't cases to point to yet, it is still possible that the virus could inspire new attacks or lead to new kinds of targeting. COVID-19 may not have altered the nature of terrorism in the region, but its full impact remains to be seen.

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Readers of this special may be also interested in another COVID-19 special, **Vulnerable Populations Under COVID-19 in Japan**, edited by David H. Slater.

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