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Radical Islam's Community Disservice

Muh Taufiqurrohman & Rebecca Lunnun | February 07, 2011

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In a Central Java village blanketed in grey ash from the Mount Merapi eruption, a group of men shoveled volcanic ash along the roadside one morning last November. They wore the green long-sleeved shirts and three-quarter pants of organized laborers, and they sported a variety of headwear from beanies to Islamic caps, balaclavas and ordinary hats. When a morning's work of clearing the roadway was finished, the same workers turned their attention to rebuilding a small mosque that was destroyed by the volcano eruption.

Behind this display of community service was the new face of the Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid, the group established in 2008 by radical cleric Abu Bakar Bashir to advocate Islamic law for Indonesia. The men on the flanks of Merapi were serving as part of JAT's marketing program, displaying what businesses would call corporate social responsibility in order to brand the group as socially responsible and caring. The dividends: for the group, an increased revenue base and greater human capital. But for Indonesians everywhere, it means the danger of spreading radical ideology.

In the midst of allegations by the government, the International Crisis Group and analysts that JAT has been involved in terrorism, the group is now trying to rebuild its image as a people-friendly and socially responsible mass organization by actively participating in the local community. Its recently formed volunteer-based group — the Ansharut Tauhid Community Disaster Group (Katibah) — has sent volunteers to rebuild damaged houses and mosques in remote villages that were affected by the Merapi eruption last year. This approach was intended to impress upon people that JAT was not as scary as it is portrayed in the media — and that, in fact, JAT was there for the poor at a time when others, like the government, were absent.

None of this is surprising, of course. One longstanding strategy of Islamist groups in many places has been to portray themselves as social welfare bodies. Indeed insurgencies of all kinds, including communist movements, have often used a strategy of outreach into needy communities to build political and social support.

For JAT, Katibah's social activities also serve more specifically as a strategic branding tool to differentiate JAT from competitors such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia. So not only does JAT portray itself as more useful and in touch with the people than the government, but also as the most socially responsible among Shariah advocacy groups in Indonesia.

JAT's social responsibility initiative also has an internal focus, as it hopes that members will gain, in identifying themselves with its social mission, a valuable sense of belonging to a worthy cause. The group understands that human and intellectual capital is one of its most valuable assets. And following the arrest of a number of its leaders last year, it desperately needs to keep morale high among members. Simple activities like meal times are an important opportunity to strengthen bonds among JAT members. As they sit on a mat floor in a small room, eating rice from bowls and drinking sweet tea, these bearded men feel like brothers, and,

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to the outsider, they are easily identified as such by their community disaster group uniforms.

Community involvement also helps develop new skills and encourages participation, sharing and team spirit within the group. Once training is completed, members are sent to natural disaster areas and assigned to propagate JAT's ideology. Community involvement provides the perfect infrastructure for JAT members to spread their message, giving them a means to share experiences regarding jihad during breaks or at evening religious sessions.

What danger does JAT's social initiative pose for antiterrorism efforts in Indonesia?

First, it provides JAT with an opportunity to consolidate and expand its network — including connecting with other Islamic groups, both radical ones such as the Bekasi Anti-Apostasy Front (FAPB) and moderate ones such as Muhammadiyah — and recruit members by initiating a hearts and minds approach in communities.

Next, social activities provide the group with the opportunity to raise money by advertising the suffering of those affected by natural disasters. Prior to and during the launch of this particular project, JAT posted ads on jihadi Web sites asking for donations from fellow Muslims. However, donors were not given details of how the money would be used and it remains unclear whether it actually went to help disaster victims.

The initiative also opens prospects for JAT to recruit new members, and it might also encourages intolerance for other faiths. For example, according www.voa-islam.com, a site run by people who happen to be JAT members, after JAT distributed prayer equipment to locals in Klaten, a priest who had come to help Christians was seen as an enemy.

How can communities and government minimize the danger? Both need to hold JAT accountable for the use of donations received from the public. The government also needs to monitor JAT operations in its volunteer areas. And maybe, if it is not too optimistic, a way may be found in the future to harness this desire by radicals to help suffering Muslims and use it to encourage them to leave the path to terrorism.

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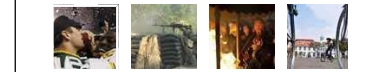
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