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Counter-Terrorism in Indonesia: Velvet-Glove Approach Works

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Reports of the Indonesian counter-terrorism department holding top terror convicts in a luxurious apartment surfaced recently, inviting harsh criticism of the police being “soft” on terrorists. The incensed public insisted on an explanation from the police for their unconventional interrogation techniques. This article invites the public to a different perspective to countering terrorism. It argues that such “soft-measures” are proving more effective in uncovering terror networks and rehabilitating terror suspects.

IN MID-OCTOBER 2007, the Indonesian newspaper *Jawa Pos* reported that Bali bombers Ali Imron and Mubarok had, since 2004, been held at a luxurious apartment in Jakarta while assisting in police investigation. The next day, public fury erupted as angry responses from locals and foreigners flooded the press, calling such action an example of entrenched corruption that allows escape from the arms of justice, and an instance of insensitivity towards the families of the victims of terrorist acts. The Police headquarters had stepped forward to counter those allegations, saying that the duo were always in a detention centre. The visit to the apartment was a one-off move to help police in their investigation of the Poso violence.

Since its founding on 26 August 2004, the Indonesian Anti-Terror Special Detachment 88 has been the focus of much controversy for its alleged ill-treatment of terror suspects during arrests, like in the case of Jemaah Islamiyah military wing commander Abu Dujana. A more recent case was that of allowing Imron to grant an interview on Australian radio ABC Radio National. Does the Detachment deserve the flak it is receiving?

Little sense?

Certainly, in international eyes devoid of cultural understanding, such action made little sense. Both men had been spared the death penalty, in consideration of the overflowing remorse shown for their deeds, especially by Imron. "I will never stop asking for forgiveness," he said to ABC Australia about his role as the field coordinator of the bombing. "It was a wrong kind of jihad," he added. Imron now campaigns to halt extremism in his family's Al-Islam religious school in Central Java by sending them cassette tapes of his new anti-violence message. However, the obvious repentance did not lead to a light sentence. Both men are facing life imprisonment and rightly so, for the 2002 Bali blast that killed 202 and injured 209 people, Indonesians among them. The remorse and efforts to assist the authorities seem to justify the commuting of the death sentence.

Public grief and anger aside, locking up terror convicts and throwing away the key is not a good long-

term solution to the problem. At the time when 911-style attacks continue to find favour among extremists, the ability to protect the public rest heavily on information; even the smallest scrap may make, literally, the difference between life and death. So keeping terror convicts on hand for information in order to root out the network is always a good option. Then the critical question becomes what is the best forum for extracting that information? Here the line blurs.

Can the same effect be achieved by questioning them in places other than the cell, where they should rightly dwell, such as by bringing them to cafe or inviting them to a gathering? While there is no clear answer, in the language of human interaction, it is more probable that one will reveal more to someone one trusts rather than someone who tries to exercise his authority over others. The establishment of the personal bond is influenced by the local culture of interaction. In this instance, it is helpful to examine the anti-terror department's relationship with the detainees with the concept of patron-client relationship, which is especially pronounced in Southeast Asia. Without the understanding of this concept, where proximity to the one in authority is the key to rewards for the obedient, the unconventional treatment of the convicts makes little sense.

A cultural approach

The Police's course of action towards Imron and Mubarok can be seen as a replacement of a patron-client relationship in which the role of the patron was occupied by the leader of the terrorist network or cell. By extending acts such as allowing for the terror convicts' reunion with their families and rendering financial assistance, the police are replacing the leaders of the extremist groups as the convict's new patrons, who traditionally ensured the livelihood of their clients' families. By conducting prayer sessions among inmates, Brigadier General Surya Dharma acted as a new spiritual leader in their lives, a role that traditional patrons held. Replacement of the old patron is the key in the anti-terror department's strategy. And the convicts are restricted to only one patron -- the police -- in the course of their detention. If the patron treats them well, as is the case, there is no reason for the new relationship not to be mutually satisfactory. It helps also when convicts are fully convinced of their new mission to stop terrorist acts and give their cooperation willingly. Thus re-formulating the patron-client relationship in this way must therefore be seen as a locally-specific and important aspect in counter-terrorism in Indonesia...

It can of course be argued that such actions are contrary to the impersonal system of justice. Sociologists S.N. Eisenstadt and Louis Roniger wrote: "The (patron-client) relations established are not fully legal or contractual; they are often opposed to the official laws of the country and are based more on informal-although tightly binding- understandings." In other words, to get at the information about terrorist networks, using the legal framework alone is sometimes insufficient. Establishment of new personal relationships embedded in the existing social system in the local context can be helpful, if well employed. The congregational breaking of fast in someone's comfortable house definitely yields more results than a celebration in a dark cell.

The outcome so far

And the result? Many terror suspects have been arrested, most notably the arrest of Dujana in June this year. Some had been killed during counter-terror operations and others had become valuable informants to the police about the networks and their operations. Although no public information is available about the direct linkage of the arrests to the information given by any terror suspect, it is not implausible to infer that no small part was played by such establishment of personal relationship with the detainees. Imron said that he has been helping the police investigation these two years as he understood the extremists' thinking and organisation. To the role played by the police, he had this to say: "If the police don't handle us the way Surya Dharma handles us, people who still have the radical thinking will try to spread their message outside the prison, or even try to organise a terrorist action. At the moment, I don't see anything like that."

Unusual? Yes. Effective? That remains to be seen, but the world must take note that there have been no major terror attacks in Indonesia in the last 2 years.

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