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Indonesian Presidential Election: Jaafar Umar Thalib's 'Jihad Against Pluralism'

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Synopsis

As Indonesia's presidential election campaign intensifies, religion has become an issue again. The recent re-emergence of a leader of the Laskar Jihad militia raises the question of how and why such conservative voices have made an appearance at this stage.

Commentary

AS INDONESIA'S presidential election campaign heats up, various voices are complicating the contest between Prabowo/Hatta and Jokowi/Yusuf Kalla. The latest controversy was sparked by the re-emergence of Jaafar Umar Thalib, former leader of the now-defunct Laskar Jihad militia that was involved in the inter-religious conflict in Ambon and the Moluccas in the early 2000s.

On 8 June 2014, Jaafar made an appearance at the Kauman's Gedhe Mosque in Yogyakarta where he declared a 'jihad against pluralism' in Indonesia. Jaafar's appearance in public was unexpected as he had gone quiet since the group he once led, the Laskar Jihad, was disbanded years ago.

Jihad against pluralism

His call for a jihad against pluralism also did not sit comfortably with the citizens of Yogyakarta, a city known as the heart of Javanese culture and where the Sultan – Hamengku Buwono X – has long called for tolerance and the celebration of Indonesia's rich cultural diversity and pluralism. Yet days before the event, Yogyakarta was rocked by news of an attack on a church in the area of Sleman, close to the city.

The sudden re-appearance of Jaafar Umar Thalib during the presidential election campaign has led several local observers to ask if this is part of a wider agenda to disrupt the electoral process. Sultan Hamengku Buwono has made it clear that the royal court of Yogyakarta will remain neutral in the contest between Prabowo/Hatta and Jokowi/Kalla, and that the election campaign should not be used as an excuse to incite religious and/or ethnic hatred among the people.

Yet Jaafar's comments were undoubtedly meant to chip away at the credentials of presidential candidate Joko Widodo (aka Jokowi), whose PDI-P is seen as the party most inclined to protect religious and ethnic minorities in Indonesia.

Jaafar's speech was brazen in terms of its theme, and the man himself was unrepentant, going as far as claiming that he 'was not afraid of the police'. He was born in Malang, East Java on 29 December 1961. In the 1980s he pursued his education at the Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies (LIPIA). While at LIPIA, he rose to become the leader of the student al-Irshad organisation and actively campaigned against the state's Pancasila ideology.

In 1986, he left LIPIA to continue his studies in Saudi Arabia and later Pakistan where he took part in training before being sent off to fight with the Mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Mujahideen past and connections

It was in Pakistan that Jaafar made contact with the Mujahideen network and fought in Afghanistan. Back in Indonesia in 1994 he opened his own pesantren in Kaliurang and helped to establish the *Jama'ah Ihya al-Sunnah* community. Jaafar then began to call for the implementation of Shariah law among the Muslims.

The Jama'ah Ihya al-Sunnah quickly gained a following among Islamist student activists in the local campuses and the movement was able to spread its ideas even further via the student and activist networks.

In February 1998 Jaafar helped to create the *Forum Komunikasi Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jamaah* (FKAWL-Communication Forum of the Followers of the Prophet). The KWAWJ later served as the umbrella organisation for a number of militant Islamist groupings, one of which was the Laskar Jihad (Jihad Army) that came under the leadership of Jaafar himself.

Those familiar with Jaafar Umar Thalib's beliefs would not be surprised by his recent speech in Yogyakarta, or his call for a war against all forms of religious diversity and pluralism in Indonesia. This has been his theme dating back to the 1980s and 1990s where he argued that there is only one valid and true religion, and that any attempt at inter-religious dialogue was useless as Muslims have nothing to learn from such dialogues with other faith communities.

His rhetoric is also reminiscent of his days as a radical orator who called on Indonesian Muslims to 'do battle' against Christians in other parts of the country.

Hardliners still active

Following the widely reported speech he gave in Yogya, the local authorities were asked how and why such a talk was allowed in the first place. It was pointed out that Jaafar did not specifically spell out the theme of his talk when he asked for permission to address his followers. The latest incident has upset the royal court of Yogyakarta as well as local Indonesian scholars, activists and inter-religious dialogue advocates who see this as a dangerous setback for Indonesia's progress towards a multicultural democracy.

Though the Laskar Jihad was disbanded (by Jaafar himself, under pressure from the authorities), his Yogyakarta appearance signals that such confrontational elements still exist in Indonesian society. That he has made an appearance at the start of the presidential campaign is not a healthy sign at all, for his attack against pluralism is seen by many as a direct challenge to the multicultural principles embodied in the Pancasila ideology of the Indonesian republic.

Added to that is the thinly-veiled threat against non-Muslims and those engaged in dialogue with them, which in the local context refers to the Jokowi camp; which in turn makes Jaafar's speech a decidedly political act. Thus far religion has not been absent in the election campaign and in the accompanying 'black campaign' that has been waged in the internet in particular:

Other hardline groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI- *Fron Pembela Islam*) have also come out, attacking the religious credentials of one candidate in particular. Jokowi has been compelled to defend his religious beliefs, and to 'prove' that he is a Muslim after repeated attacks that his religious identity is nominal and superficial at best.

Whether the rest of the election campaign will witness the re-emergence of more actors from Indonesia's violent past remains to be seen, but at this stage it seems that sectarianism is far from dead in Indonesian politics. Should such inflammatory rhetoric continue, and be accompanied by confrontational actions, then the Indonesian presidential race may be further impacted by factors that are unpredictable and difficult to control.

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