

Indonesian Policies and Quirks

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The Root Cause of Terrorism? Not Poverty or Lack of Education

Posted by rivanroyono under [Community](#), [Democracy](#), [Education](#), [Public policy](#), [Terrorism](#) | Tags: [al-qaeda](#), [azahari](#), [dissent](#), [education](#), [freethinker](#), [hizbut tahrir](#), [Indonesia](#), [lack of education](#), [nordin m top](#), [poverty](#), [Terrorism](#) | [\[17\] Comments](#)

Special thanks to my best friend, Sherria Ayuandini, who gave me some great insights on the issue and provided one of the major arguments for this piece.

When it comes to identifying the root cause of terrorism, many are compelled to point fingers on poverty and lack of education. The argument, in a nutshell, goes somewhat as follows: Poor, uneducated people are easily lured to promises of heaven and blowing other people up to attain them.

However, such theory does not stand its ground when confronted with facts. Marc Sageman of Foreign Policy Research Institute compiled the background data of around 400 Al-Qaeda members and discovered that three quarters of his sample belonged to the middle or upper class. He further noted that, "[T]he vast majority—90 percent—came from caring, intact families. Sixty-three percent had gone to college, as compared with the 5-6 percent that's usual for the third world. These are the best and brightest of their societies in many ways."

Economists Efraim Benmelech of Harvard University and Claude Berrebi of RAND Corporation also came to the same conclusion when they gathered data on Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel from 2000 to 2005. They discovered that education is very much valued in the "terrorism market." Better educated individuals are more likely to be successful in carrying out large-scale terrorist attacks and have lower chances of getting caught.

It should also be noted that the alleged leader of the 9/11 attack, Mohammed Atta, had a graduate degree, while both Azahari and Noordin Top, masterminds of the major terrorist attacks in the last decade in Indonesia, were skilled engineers and scientists. None of them were poor; all three came from affluent families.

Obviously, the majority of terrorists in the world don't fit the poor and uneducated profile. As such, simply expanding education and eradicating poverty would unlikely affect terrorist recruitment. We need to look deeper. In that light, there are at least three issues that are often overlooked, each bearing a consequence in how public policies should be shaped and how we as the community should act in countering the seeds of terrorism.

First, it's not a coincidence that many terrorist masterminds come from countries with repressive government, like the Arab states and, arguably, Malaysia. Repressive governments tend to bar legal venues of voicing dissent, thus making extreme demonstration of opposition more attractive. When the cost of legal dissent increases—due to threat of legal repercussions—the relative cost of illegal dissent is lowered. Hence terrorism becomes a viable venue.

Therefore, it's within our interest to allow dissent. Specifically for Indonesia, we need to allow

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organizations like Hizbut Tahrir and the Islamic Defenders Front to exist. It doesn't mean we should let them do whatever they want. They still have to be legally accountable for their actions; if and when they employ violence or thuggery, they have to pay for their actions to the fullest extent of the law. We should also continue voicing opposition to their radical stances and gospel of hatred. However, their right to association and voicing dissent should be recognized and upheld. Perhaps it's worth to remind ourselves that virtually none of the major Indonesian terrorists are affiliated to these legal organizations.

Second, acts of terrorism and suicide bombing require the breaking of the fear of the pain involved in the act and the reservation of hurting other people. An effective way of doing this is by psychological enforcement, most notably by an authority or peers. A common trait shared by terrorists is that they have a figure of authority that they fully and unquestionably respect. It's also very common for prospective terrorists to join a perverse cause through preexisting social bonds with people who are already terrorists or had decided to join.

So here's what we need to understand: An education system that puts a very high premium on respect for authority and discourage freethinking would produce individuals that are highly susceptible to psychological enforcement. So while simply more education may not be effective in countering the roots of terrorism, how we educate matters significantly. We need to push, not discourage, our children to question the authorities—their teachers and parents—and the majority—their friends. We need to make them comfortable to be different and to disagree. This will make them significantly less vulnerable to “brainwashing” by radicalism.

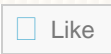
Lastly, we should heed the statistics found by Mr. Sageman in his research: An overwhelming majority of the educated individuals in his sample of Al-Qaeda members are engineers, architects, civil engineers, and scientists. People with backgrounds in humanities are grossly underrepresented. Is there anything in humanities that make its students less susceptible to radical, narrow-minded, chauvinistic ideas? In short, the answer is yes.

Students of humanities make a conscious effort to learn different cultures, religions, and values. This leads them to respect people of all walks of life, even if they don't necessarily agree with the values those other people hold. It's this spirit of humanities that should be integrated in our education system. Indonesian youth needs to learn, and perhaps even experience, different values. The many live-in programs already conducted by various local NGOs, bringing in students of different religious and cultural backgrounds to stay with families in Aceh, Lombok and Papua, should be expanded. It's high time for us to not only tolerate diversity, but embrace it.

At the end of the day, it's really more complex than simply poverty and lack of education. If we're really serious about addressing the root of terrorism, we need to uphold civil liberty, teach our children that it's alright to question the authority, and expose them to different values. That's going to be a challenge not only for the government, but for all of us—parents, teachers, and the community. But nobody ever said addressing the roots of terrorism is easy.

An edited version of this article (with some colorful comments, I might add) is available at [Jakarta Globe](#).

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