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The image of Indonesia as home of moderate Muslims has come into question following terrorist attacks last month during which members of three pro-ISIS families tried to carry out separate but coordinated suicide bombings. AAP, CC BY-SA

Female suicide bombers: how terrorist propaganda radicalises Indonesian women

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Last month, Indonesia was shaken by a series of deadly terrorist attacks. Indonesian National police announced that the local extremist network of Jama'ah Ansharud Daulah (JAD), affiliated with ISIS, was responsible.

The world's largest Muslim majority country has worked hard to block homegrown terrorist cells. Government and non-government organisations, including international institutions, have allocated budgets and collaborated to implement diverse de-radicalisation programmes. However, the involvement of children as suicide bombers in this series of attacks has led some to believe these programmes have failed in cutting the chain of terrorism.

In our research, we investigate the conditions that lead to the radicalisation of women and children.

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Awakening of sleeper cells

The image of Indonesia as home of moderate Muslims has come into question, especially due to the recent awakening of homegrown sleeper ISIS cells. Last year, the country's military chief, General Gatot Nurmantyo, declared that such cells were operating in almost all parts of Indonesia.

Before the formation of JAD in 2015, the leading group responsible for terrorist attacks was the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network, a South East Asian extremist group based in Indonesia. JI is affiliated indirectly with al-Qaeda and is responsible for the Bali bombings in 2002, which killed 202 people.

As a newcomer, JAD works with other radical movements, including extremists from Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), which was founded by a former leading figure in JI, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. Therefore, there is a link between JAD and JI. However, closer analysis demonstrates the groups differ in important aspects.

The caderisation and membership within JI are stricter than within JAD, which allows anyone who is interested to become part of its small cells. Another difference is their target, which reminds us of the difference between al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Al-Qaeda initially often referred to the West as its principal enemy, while in its earlier phase, ISIS demonstrated that its main enemy was not the distant West, but rather the nominal Muslim ("near" enemy), particularly Shiites and Sunni apostates. JAD's main targets so far are also the "near" enemy, mainly Indonesian civilians, including non-Muslims, and police officers, while JI has often targeted Westerners.

Families radicalised

The involvement of women in suicide bombings, which perpetrators usually call amaliyah (sacrifice or suicide attack), is not an entirely new phenomenon for Indonesia. In 2016, the country was shocked by the emergence of the first female would-be bomber, Dian Yulia Novi. In an interview, Novi said she was inspired by the status of extremist ulama (clerics) and ISIS fighters on their Facebook accounts. Her marriage to M. Nur Solihin, a member of a homegrown militant cell inspired by ISIS, was to prepare her for a suicide bomb plot at the presidential palace in Jakarta, but the plot failed.

The latest series of blasts, in East Java, took a different trajectory, especially with the involvement of children. The perpetrators of the bombings of three churches in Surabaya were Dita Oepriarto, Puji Kuswati and their four children, the youngest of whom was nine years old. All six were killed, as well as 12 church goers.

On the same day, the Sidoarjo region witnessed a premature bomb explosion in a low-cost apartment belonging to a family of five. The parents and one of their three children were killed.

The day after, Tri Murtiono, Tri Ernawati and their three children, including an eight-year-old girl, blew themselves up at Surabaya police headquarters. All but one of the children were killed.

Why women become terrorists

Scholars point to diverse motives for women's involvement in terrorist groups. The most important is ideology. According to ISIS followers, true Muslims must respond to the call of ISIS leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi to emigrate to Syria to build and nurture ISIS territory. The fighters need wives and mothers to produce the next generation of terrorists.

Another important motive is women's disenchantment with their home country. ISIS's prowess for propaganda, through diverse media, especially social media and video games, has convinced some Muslim women to travel to its territory for a better life under daulah Islamiyah (Islamic state). Notably, however, many are disappointed, particularly after seeing and experiencing brutality and unfulfilled promises.

The significant danger of disappointed returnees has been widely acknowledged. However, many believe those who are radicalised and have pledged allegiance to the daulah but are unable to go because of the global travel ban to ISIS territory, can be even more dangerous. This has been a major concern of security agencies not only in Indonesia but also in many Western countries.

The fact these radicalised women cannot join al Khansaa Brigade, an all-female militia group of ISIS formed in 2014 and operating in Iraq and Syria, does not mean they cannot conduct a deadly attack to support ISIS missions.

Female martyrdom

Elites of diverse terrorist groups often mention that using women should be a last option in the case of "emergencies", including lack of male fighters. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the current condition of ISIS, which has lost ground in many parts of Syria and Iraq, has led ISIS elites to call for greater female involvement in missions.

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In Indonesia, the imprisonment of terrorists affiliated with diverse terrorist groups, including ISIS, has also led local terrorist leaders to call for greater participation from women. They believe in the potential success of terrorist acts involving women because women are less likely to be suspected and detected as terrorists.

In line with this, female fighters and suicide bombers have a strong belief in the exceptional position of a shahid (martyr). This includes beliefs that the purity status of martyrs allows them to be buried

wearing clothes, without ritual washing, and that they would be granted the highest position close to the throne of god. In addition, they also believe their success in raising their children to be mujahidin (male fighters) and mujahidat (female fighters) can warrant them a portion of their children's rewards.

In 2010, conducting research on women attached to terrorist networks in Indonesia, one of us met a woman who nicknamed herself Umm Mujahid (a mother of a male fighter). Asked why, she said:

I want my nickname to be my prayer. I hope my little son will be a mujahid in the future, so he can bring me to God's heaven.

This kind of ideology has become ingrained in the hearts and minds of radicalised women. Therefore, it is not surprising that bombings in Indonesia are beginning to involve women and children.

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