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## **Is it really a surprise that radicals might have infiltrated Indonesian kindergartens?**

Wednesday 22 August 2018, by [MARCOES Lies](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2018).

This 17 August, Indonesia was shocked by an unusual - and deeply troubling - celebration of Indonesian Independence Day. A video circulated widely on [Facebook](#) showing kindergarten students from Probolinggo, East Java, participating in an Independence Day parade wearing black robes typically associated with conservative Islamist groups and carrying fake automatic weapons.



Especially shocking to many Indonesians was the fact that the children were from a Kartika Kindergarten, managed by the Army Wives Association (Persit) and supposedly under the supervision of the local district military command (Kodim) - which one would assume would be wary of any displays of radicalism.

In a press conference following the uproar, the kindergarten principal said the kindergarten had chosen to “highlight Muhammad’s struggle” as a way to increase their student’s “faith and devotion to God”. The head of the local military command reportedly also gave permission for the costumes to be used, believing it would “promote Islamic values”.

Rather than easing tensions, the responses of the head of the kindergarten and the military commander raised further questions. Many claimed their responses - interpreting jihad as involving fighting non-believers with weapons - were evidence of the infiltration of Salafi teachings into the school system and the military. Others suggested it was further evidence of the influence of funds from Saudi Arabia on local understandings of Islam. Some were more forgiving, dismissing the debacle as the actions of a naïve teacher with little understanding of the political implications of such a display.

While the choice of costume was deeply disturbing, the fact that something like this could happen in an Indonesian kindergarten was not a surprise to me. I was more surprised that so few members of the public were aware of the poor supervision over the Indonesian early childhood education system.

In 2014, I conducted research on early childhood education in Aceh with Ary Hasriadi, a researcher from Innawa Makassar. We found that compared to other levels of education, early childhood education received the lowest level of supervision from the national government. Kindergartens were basically free to teach whatever they wanted, with limited direction or control by the Ministry of Education and Culture. In Aceh Timur District, for example, the local government issued a policy preventing girls from dancing, even at kindergarten level, apparently as a means of “implementing shari’a” and protecting girls from “bad behaviour”. In a school in another district, female students

were prevented from singing the national anthem, because the school principal believed it could “weaken their faith”.

Under Indonesian law, early childhood education can be implemented both through the formal education system and through informal community-based organisations. Formal early childhood education institutions include kindergartens (Taman Kanak-Kanak, TK) and Islamic kindergartens (Raudatul Athfal, RA). Informal early childhood education includes playgroups and childcare centres, managed by the community. The law provides for government oversight of kindergartens and early childhood education but in practice, supervision is minimal, and focuses on the fulfilment of administrative requirements, such as suitable facilities, availability of teachers, play equipment and teacher-student ratios. The curriculum is subject to very little oversight.

According to data from the Ministry of Education and Culture, in 2016-2017, there were more than 88,000 kindergartens and more than 105,000 playgroups, childcare centres and other early childhood education institutions across Indonesia. In Jakarta alone, there were more than 2,400 kindergartens and more than 2,000 playgroups, childcare centres and other early childhood education institutions. In East Java, home of the Probolinggo kindergarten, there were more than 14,000 kindergartens and more than 19,000 playgroups, childcare centres and other early childhood education institutions.

Only a small number of these kindergartens are directly managed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Some 96.4 per cent of kindergartens across Indonesia are managed by private community groups or religious organisations - including the Probolinggo kindergarten. Meanwhile, of the total 105,000 informal early childhood education centres, 95.4 per cent had yet to pass government accreditation.

Growth in early childhood education facilities in Indonesia has been driven in part by parents’ desires to ensure their children have basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic before they enter primary school. This has occurred because many primary schools are now using competency in reading, writing and arithmetic as selection criteria for new students, on the basis that schools are overcrowded.

As most Indonesians are Muslim, kindergartens and other early childhood education institutions are filled predominantly with students from Muslim communities. And as one would expect, early childhood education institutions also provide religious instruction, as many parents demand. Consequently, Indonesia has seen a blossoming of integrated Islamic kindergartens (Taman Kanak-Kanak Islam Terpadu, or TKIT), which aim to provide Islamic education at the kindergarten level and then channel students into the Islamic education system.

The quality of education in these TKIT can be highly variable. The growth in TKIT occurred at around the same time as the growth in the Tarbiyah movement, the conservative educational movement associated with the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). But TKIT are not only associated with the Tarbiyah movement. There are many “moderate” TKIT, just as there are several are affiliated with Salafi or extremist groups. I visited an Islamic school in Bogor, for example, which offered education from kindergarten to high school level and received its funding from Salafis from Kuwait.

Because so many kindergartens are run by private groups and religious organisations, it is difficult to find any that do not have a religious affiliation. Non-denominational kindergartens are usually only found in large cities, and are usually only those kindergartens that are bilingual or follow an internationally recognised curriculum, like Montessori schools.

In community or privately-run religious kindergartens, children are often pushed to memorise

religious material. At a time when they should be developing and refining their fine motor skills through activities like drawing and painting, children are asked to sit still and recite religious texts. The focus on memorising religious texts is in many cases not just the result of school policy, many parents also demand it. It is a great source of pride for many mothers when their children are able to recite Islamic texts before entering primary school.

The lack of control over teaching in kindergartens is also influenced by the educators. In several kindergartens they require their teachers to hold qualifications to teach at the kindergarten level, however, in many places, teachers have no formal training in early childhood education, let alone a particular educational philosophy. But with salaries sometimes as low as Rp 200,000 (about A\$20) per month, what quality can one expect from these teachers?

Given these vast challenges, is it really surprising that there was a kindergarten that thought it was appropriate to encourage its students to wear long robes and carry weapons as a form of following the example of the prophet Muhammad?

Of equal concern is that so many parents and the parade organisers allowed the kindergarten children to dress as violent jihadists and did not see anything worrying about it. If the children were wearing bikinis or revealing costumes would members of the school community or parade organisers have stopped them from marching?

Indonesians should not blame only the kindergartens, we must blame ourselves for allowing our kindergartens to become places where this kind of thing can happen.

**Lies Marcoes**

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**P.S.**

• Indonesia at Melbourne, August 20, 2018;  
<http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/is-it-really-a-surprise-that-radicals-might-have-infiltrated-indonesian-kindergartens>

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