

Indonesia: The Makassar Bombing: Attacking Terrorist Attacks

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The condemnation in Indonesia of the anti-religious nature of this latest terrorist attack is stronger and broader than before.

On 28 March, the Christian holy day of Palm Sunday, a married couple [detonated](#) a suicide bomb outside a Catholic Church in Makassar, killing themselves and injuring about twenty people. While no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, the police are [accusing](#) an organisation which is sympathetic to the Islamic State. Several other members of the group have been arrested, accused of involvement in planning and implementing the attack. A religious mentor of the attackers [reportedly](#) was recently killed by the security apparatus.

This is not the first such attack on a church. In 2018 three churches and the police in Surabaya were attacked within 24 hours by [three different families](#), killing twenty-eight. Since 2002 Indonesia has suffered at least twelve terrorist attacks, including this Makassar attack and the 2018 Surabaya attacks. Other targets included a popular tourist spot in Bali, a five star hotel in Jakarta as well as the Australian Embassy.

The consequent escalation of the police hunt for underground organisations threatening terrorist attacks have turned the police themselves into a terrorist target. While “Christianisation”, “liberalism” and “communism” are the three most common stated ideological enemies of jihadist fundamentalism in Indonesia, the police have won equal enemy status. The police are [called thaghut](#) (Islamic terminology denoting a focus of worship other than God. It often connotes demons). A few days after the Makassar bombing, a female militant [attempted](#) an attack at a police headquarters in Jakarta and was shot.

The governments of the day have always condemned such attacks as have all the mainstream religious organisations, including Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. The more conservative and fundamentalist above-ground Islamic organisations have always distanced themselves from such actions. At the same time, there have been individual independent preachers who have been more ambiguous, [attacking](#) suicide bomber critics as “tools of Zionism”.

Following the Makassar attack, it is possible to detect what might turn out to be an important change in mainstream reactions to the bombings. Some statements repeated past formulation such as President Widodo’s [statement](#), “I call on everyone to fight against terror and radicalism, which go against religious values.” Similar sentiments were expressed by the Minister for Religious Affairs.

This time however there were also [statements](#) by the president, Vice-President Ma’ruf Amin and the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Mohammad Mahfud MD that the attacks had nothing whatsoever at all to do with religion – nothing whatsoever at all. At one level, these statements are no doubt intending to make the point that religion does not condone terrorism.

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against terrorist bombings more strongly than before.

However, they have attracted a great deal of cynical commentary, especially on social media. These statements by national political leaders do not address that the 12 bombings have been carried out by individuals or groups justifying their attacks in the name of religion, and are being made at the same time as [the police are saying](#) that the Makassar bombing was carried out by pro-Islamic State persons. Some social media comment has satirically asked in response to these frequent statements whether it means that the bombers were atheists.

The Indonesian government is very aware that violent religious radicalism resides within the religious community and has implemented a variety of social and educational programmes to counter this radicalism, in addition to the police monitoring of very conservative religious groups. Although not accused of such violent attacks as bombings, the government has banned two significant religious groups on ideological grounds, Hizbut Tahrir and the Front Pembela Islam (FPI).

The current string of statements that the Makassar bombing has nothing to do with religion are a stronger reprimand than previous statements. They are not accusations that the perpetrators have just misunderstood Islamic teachings. Instead, they imply that the perpetrators should not in fact be considered Muslims. They sound like excommunication.

There are signs that even the most politically conservative Islamic groups are reacting against terrorist bombings more strongly than before. The prominent political figure, Munawarman, Secretary-General of the FPI before it was banned, [reacted this way](#):

“I think incidents like this, both those in Makassar a few days ago, and the one now (at the Police Headquarters), from the point of view that this seems to represent Islam, I think it is precisely with these kinds of incidents, the Islamic community is hurt.”

He complained that netizens were all condemning Islam because of them. This statement is no doubt connected to efforts to link [the FPI with terrorist acts](#), including this bombing, and the FPI distancing itself from these acts and accusations.

It seems that the frustration with being unable to stop these bombing incidents may be having consequences for the broader spectrum of political Islam in Indonesia and in the government. The more recent “extra-communicating” tone of the condemnatory statements will be used to justify more severe activity by the police rather than educational countermeasures.

If frustrations are increasing within both the mainstream political, including the governing coalition, and the most conservative above ground groups, harsher police action taken against groups connected with terrorist acts may follow. This may in turn exacerbate hostility towards the police.

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