

PERSPECTIVE

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Anti-Ethnic Chinese Groups in Indonesia Likely to Strike Again

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In September 2019, a plot to bomb seven Chinese business centres in Jakarta was uncovered, leading to the arrest of 11 persons, including Abdul Basith, a lecturer from the Institute of Agriculture at Bogor (IPB), and a retired Rear Admiral, Sonny Santo.
- The plan was to create chaos by harming Chinese businesses, thereby disrupting Jokowi's inauguration in October 2019.
- The bomb plot was not directly linked to the Islamist grouping known as 212 Alumni, but the bombings were to coincide with the 212 Jihadi Action demonstration planned for 28 September. The 212 Alumni aims to promote conservative and radical Islam while undermining ethnic Chinese economic strength in Indonesia.
- In the foreseeable future, Islamist groups and anti-Jokowi forces are likely to collaborate in stoking anti-Chinese sentiments in pursuit of their respective political and economic goals.

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THE PLOT UNCOVERED

In the second week of October 2019, the leading Indonesian magazine *Majalah Tempo* published a special report on the uncovered plot to bomb seven megamalls in Jakarta and the masterminds behind it. Apparently, these masterminds were linked Muslim extremists and retired generals who were anti-Chinese and anti-Joko “Jokowi” Widodo.

According to *Tempo*, the plot was discovered in late September when a car leaving the house of retired Rear Admiral Sonny Santoso in Tangerang, Banten province in West Java, was stopped by the police. One of the passengers was 62-year-old Abdul Basith, a lecturer at the Institute of Agriculture at Bogor (IPB). With him was Laode Sugiono. Both Basith and Sugiono are members of the Majelis Kebangsaan Pancasila Jiwa Nusantara (MKPJN, the National Council of the Spirit of Pancasila Nusantara). The police found a teargas canister in the car and suspicious messages in their mobile phones. An interrogation followed, and the plot was uncovered. Basith was detained and his residence in Bogor searched. The police found 29 Fish Bombs that are several times more powerful than Molotov cocktails. Fast action of the police prevented the bomb tragedy in Jakarta. Presently, 11 persons who were involved in the conspiracy have been detained with the police obtaining further valuable information from the detainees.

Basith turned out to be a key man in the plot. He confessed that on 20 September 2019, he participated in a secret meeting at retired Major General Soenarko’s house. 15 persons attended the meeting, including Sonny Santoso. They planned to stage demonstrations in Jakarta and bomb a few areas where ethnic Chinese businessmen tended to concentrate, i.e. the seven megamalls in Jakarta, including the Glodok Mall, Kelapa Gading Mall, and Taman Anggrek Mall.¹

According to Basith, Soenarko who chaired the meeting complained about the country’s serious problems caused by “the Chinamen (*Cina*) in Indonesia and also from other countries”.² The participants of the meeting agreed that the “Chinamen were a thorn in the flesh” and decided to do something to solve the problem: i.e. by harassing Chinese businesses and expelling “naughty Chinamen” from Indonesia.³ They recruited people to make bombs and selected seven Chinese business centres as targets.

The meeting assigned different roles to participants, including the recruitment of bomb-makers, raising funds, and serving as co-ordinators. Although they planned to recruit 20 bomb-makers, only 4 persons, all of whom were fishermen, were recruited. Basith who was to fund the bomb makers and their air travels, did not do so eventually, as these expenses were paid for by Soenarko.⁴ However, Soenarko in his written interview with *Tempo* only admitted that there was a meeting at his residence, but denied that they discussed any plot to bomb megamalls. He claimed that he did not know Basith well and that Basith was lying.⁵

According to information obtained by the police, the bombing which was rumoured earlier was eventually changed to coincide with the so-called 212 Jihadi Action (Aksi Mujahid 212) on 28 September, as they were not ready. On that day, the 212 Alumni had planned to organize demonstrations in front of the Presidential Palace, with the Basith group carrying out the bombing to achieve maximum impact. The immediate objective was to prevent Joko Widodo from being inaugurated on 20 October 2019.⁶

Basith revealed that initially, the bomb makers were supposed to stay in the house of retired Admiral Slamet Soebijanto who was once the Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Navy (2005-2007). However, as his house was crowded bomb-makers used Basith's house instead. Slamet is in fact the chairman of the Majelis Kebangsaan Pancasila Jiwa Nusantara (MKPJN), an opposition think-tank established in 2010. The police accused Slamet of plotting the bombings.

Tempo specially interviewed Slamet, who stated that in the last eight years, the council that he led had been of the view that "the implementation of Pancasila by the Indonesian government is incorrect and democratic politics is in danger".⁷ However, he denied that he was involved in the bombing plot.

Basith revealed to *Tempo* that he joined the MKPJN council in 2016, and had discussed various political issues in this council. This time, the MKPJN met to discuss the bombing plan. Slamet, Basith said, attended every meeting.

Basith further clarified that there was a demonstration on 26 September organized by students and workers, and Slamet had a special task: to go to the Cilangkap military headquarters to call on the soldiers to join the demonstration. The purpose was to persuade the military to occupy the Parliament Building.⁸ The military did not respond to his call, however, and he had to abort the plan. Basith's claim however is not very credible. Slamet, as a retired Naval Officer, was unlikely to have had significant influence in the Cilangkap headquarters.

RETIRED GENERALS SUPPLIED ARMS

Currently, retired military officers in Indonesia can be divided into two groups—one which support Joko Widodo while another support Prabowo who has been closely connected with radical Muslim groups. In May 2019 when the Constitutional Court declared that Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin had won the presidential election, the opposition staged a protest. According to police reports, pro-Prabowo retired generals employed thugs to attack the police and Joko Widodo supporters. Soenarko was one of the retired generals who supplied pistols to the thugs.⁹ As a former commander of the Special Forces (Kopassus) and a member of the Gerindra, Soenarko is now also a member of an Aceh political party which is actively involved in politics.¹⁰

The plot to bomb megamalls was to be carried out during the 212 Jihadi Action on 28 September.¹¹ The 212 Jihadi Action was sponsored by 212 Alumni (also known as Reuni Akbar 212) which came into being after the successful major demonstration on 2 December 2016. 212 is the abbreviation of 2 December. During that time, three radical/conservative Islamic organizations the Front of Defenders of Islam (FPI), Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa (GNPF, the National Movement of the Defenders of Fatwa) and Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council), worked together with Prabowo and Islamist parties such as the Partai Keadilan dan Sejahtera (PKS). They initiated a one-million-people-demonstration to hinder the re-election of Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama alias Ahok, a Christian Chinese Indonesian who had been accused of blasphemy against Islam. This large demonstration strengthened Islam as a political force, Ahok eventually lost to the Islamist candidate (Anies Baswedan) in the Jakarta gubernatorial election.

Subsequently, he was charged with blasphemy against Islam and sentenced to two years in prison.

212 ALUMNI AND ITS ACTIVITIES

The 212 Action (demonstration) in 2016 was a watershed in contemporary Indonesian history. From that time onward, radical/conservative Islam became a political force to be reckoned with. Radical and conservative Muslims established an unofficial organization, the “212 Alumni”, consisting of those who participated in the 212 demonstration.

The supporters of the 212 Alumni include not only members of Islamist parties and organizations but also some civil servant.¹² These Islamists have often organized demonstrations, but it was reported that only 3,500 to 5,000 people participated in the demonstration held on 28 September 2019 in Jakarta with the theme of “Saving the United Republic of Indonesia” (Selamatkan NKRI).¹³ However, during the reunion on 2 December 2019, hundreds of thousands of people gathered at Monas (National Monument). Jakarta’s governor Anies Baswedan was present and made a speech, showing his interest in gaining their support for his future presidency. There is no doubt that the 212 Alumni has crept into Indonesian society as well as the economic sector.

In 2016, MUI discussed the concept of the Koperasi Sharia (Sharia Cooperative). 212 Alumni members immediately established a Sharia Cooperative. In 2017 this Sharia Cooperative obtained permission from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SME to run its business. In May 2017, the first 212 Mart was opened in Bogor, a stronghold of conservative Muslims.¹⁴ This 212 Mart differs from other chain stores in that it sells halal daily necessities, food, kitchen-utensils and stationery, similar to what Indo Mart or Alfa Mart does. However, 212 Mart does not sell cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives and goods which are prohibited in Islam.¹⁵ In other words, this is an Muslim mart, born of Identity Politics. Within a year, 192 units of “212 Mart” had been set up throughout Indonesia, and its number is increasing rapidly.¹⁶

The existence of the 212 Mart will unavoidably have an impact on the existing general marts such as Indo Mart and Alfa Mart that are run by non-Muslims and that sell non-halal items. If the number of 212 Marts continues to increase rapidly, non-Islamic marts would be affected unless they too embrace the Islamic Mart business model, with halal certification.

There is a bigger picture behind the Islamization of Indonesian society which is linked to the Jokowi administration. In December 2018, prior to the presidential election, the Bappenas (National Planning Body) issued a Masterplan for the Islamization of the economy (Masterplan Ekonomi Syariah Indonesia 2019-2024).¹⁷ On 14 May 2019 President Jokowi (together with Ma’ruf Amin) officially launched the masterplan, declaring that the Indonesian economic system would be based on the Sharia. The Masterplan noted that the government would further develop Islamic finance (including Islamic Banks), Halal Tourism, Halal Fashion, Halal Recreation, Halal Pharmacy, Halal Industry. To gain Islamist support, Jokowi had to implement this sharia economy programme.¹⁸ The most conspicuous part of the programme has been about the halal certificate.

The halal certificate is issued by the state but with the cooperation of MUI. The chairman of MUI is still Ma'ruf Amin who is now also the new vice-president of Indonesia. Once the halal certificate is popularly issued, food outlets and other areas will be affected. If all Marts sought and obtained halal certificates, the Islamization process in Indonesia would be intensified. If non-Islamic Marts do not apply for a halal certificate, their business may be greatly affected.

Moreover, with the promotion of the halal economy, social segregation is likely to deepen. This will affect the unity and interaction of Indonesians with different religions. It is reported that Ma'ruf Amin has been given the task to deal with the "sharia economy". The halal economy in Indonesia is likely to be strengthened, giving rise to radical and conservative Islam.

Radical and conservative Muslims and entrenched interest groups (such as the Suharto group.) regard the ethnic Chinese as their major rivals. They have attempted to create problems and chaos in Indonesia so that they would be able to have both political and economic gains. The ethnic Chinese issue has been politicized and is likely to be used again by opposition politicians. The bombing conspiracy in Jakarta in the late September 2019 involved major actors such as Islamists who are dissatisfied with Chinese economic strength and are unhappy with the non-Islamic culture represented by the Chinese community. They are also against Jokowi who is considered to be not Islamic enough. These Islamists have been collaborating with opposition groups who did not benefit under the Jokowi administration. These include retired generals and opposition group members etc. The 212 Alumni group appears to be the core group in the anti-ethnic Chinese and anti-Jokowi force. It is likely that these different actors will continue to co-operate at least in the short term.

¹ "Skenario Bom Supermi di Aksi 212", *Tempo*, 13 October 2019, p. 69.

² *Ibid.*, p.67.

³ *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.69. However, according to Kompas, Basith donated 1 million rupiahs to pay for the materials. <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2019/10/18/18553761/kronologi-penangkapan-abdul-basith-usai-rapat-perencanaan-peledakan-bom?page=all> (Accessed 18/11/2019).

⁵ "Mantan komandan Jenderal Komando Pasukan Khusus, Mayor Jenderal (Purnawirawan) Soenarko: Taka da rencana apa pun", *Tempo*, 13 October, p.74.

⁶ <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2019/10/09/17315911/simpan-29-bom-ikan-dosen-ipb-ingin-gagalkan-pelantikan-jokowi> (Accessed 18/11/2019)

⁷ "Ketua Majelis Kebangsaan Pancasila Jiwa Nusantara Slamet Soebijanto: Kami tidak tahu rencana itu". *Tempo*, 13 October 2019, p.71.

⁸ "Skenario Bom Supermi di Aksi 212", *Tempo*, 13 October 2019, p.69.

⁹ Liao Jianyu, "Yinni saolluan de jingzhong"(The warning bell of Indonesia's riots", *Lianhe Zaobao*, 24 June 2019. <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/zopinions/views/story20190624-966890> (Accessed 27.11/2019).

¹⁰ <https://katadata.co.id/berita/2019/05/31/soenarko-eks-danjen-kopassus-yang-terseret-kepemilikan-senjata-ilegal> (Accessed 27/11/2019).

¹¹ "Klub Diskusi Dosen Ekonomi", *Tempo*, 13 October 2019, p.70.

¹² As 212 is not a formal organization, it is difficult to identify its members. Many government servants, including some military personnel, are sympathetic to this “movement”. Anies Baswedan, for example, makes it a point to attend its gatherings, and on 2 December 2019, he made a speech at the reunion of 212 alumni, donning his official uniform. Source: <https://tirto.id/peserta-reuni-212-memuji-anies-baswedan-membenci-ahok-btp-emGJ> (Accessed 17/12/2019).

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyLDQOoUucQ> (Accessed 18/11/2019)

¹⁴ <https://koperasisyariah212.co.id/blog/2017/05/12/212-mart-pertama-didirikan-di-bogor/> (Accessed 27/11/2019).

¹⁵ <https://finance.detik.com/berita-ekonomi-bisnis/d-3926994/apa-bedanya-212-mart-dengan-minimarket-lain> (Accessed 27/11/2019).

¹⁶ <https://kumparan.com/kumparanbisnis/satu-tahun-berdiri-212-mart-sudah-punya-192-toko-dan-49-ribu-anggota-1535444160715217201> (Accessed 27/11/2019). More than half of the 212 Mart are in Jakarta and its surrounding areas. Also see:

<https://www.kompasiana.com/dia46528/5b66b5df5a676f313b2b6e8c/ketika-212-mart-menjadi-peluang-bisnis-syariah> (Accessed 27/11/2019)

¹⁷ https://ubico.id/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Masterplan-Ekonomi-Syariah-Indonesia-2019-2024_Terbaru.pdf (Accessed 17/12/2019)

¹⁸ See Syafig Hasyim’s *The Political Economy of Sharia and the Future Trajectory of Democracy in Indonesia*, *ISEAS Perspective*, 2019 no.108 (26 December 2019).

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