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Indonesian Jihad Threatens to Aggravate Instability

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The Laskar Jihad, a 10,000-strong force, is preparing to travel to Indonesia's Maluku province in a stated attempt to end the simmering sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians. An initial 3,000 volunteers are to arrive as early as April 23, threatening to fuel problems in the strife-torn province. The force not only endangers the stability of Maluku, but also has much broader implications for Indonesia's political landscape. The religious violence in Maluku has become a central point of contention among Indonesia's political factions, aggravating Jakarta's already uncertain political stability.

The religious violence in Maluku has widened splits between Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid and People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) speaker Amien Rais, both key Indonesian Muslim leaders and long time competitors. It is also raising tensions between the military and the Central Axis, a loose coalition of Muslim parties headed by Rais, as the Axis is seen supporting the Laskar Jihad. In addition, the ongoing conflict in Maluku is fueling opposition within the party of Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, the Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), further weakening her party's political effectiveness. The announced Jihad Force is bringing all of these tensions to a head, and will likely lead to a reorganization of Indonesia's political scene.

Calls for a Jihad in Maluku have received tacit or direct support from Central Axis leaders, including Amien Rais, who heads the National Mandate Party (PAN), and Hamzah Haz, leader of the United Development Party (PPP). In January, both Rais and Haz were speakers at a rally of tens of thousands of Muslims in Jakarta protesting the killing of Muslims and warning of a Jihad if the government failed to quickly stem the violence in the province.

In April, at a similar rally drawing fewer people, Muslim demonstrators pledged to carry through with their planned Jihad, opening a volunteer training camp in Bogor, West Java, less than 100 miles south of Jakarta. The rally was triggered by Wahid, who reportedly said the fighting in Maluku was caused by the mistreatment of Christians in the province. Wahid further said the situation had worsened because the previous "government gave special treatment to Muslims in Maluku, like golden boys."

Rais and the Central Axis have capitalized on Muslim discontent with Wahid's performance in ending the fighting in Maluku, as well as his calls for a repeal of the ban on communism, citing it as one of several examples of Wahid's inability to adequately perform his duties as president. During Wahid's recent overseas trip, rumors abounded that the MPR would be called into special session to review Wahid's performance and possibly remove him



from office.

While Rais toned down his rhetoric following Wahid's return, saying Wahid would be given another year to prove himself, he continues to position himself in opposition to the president. In an interview published in the April 19 Straits Times, Rais credited himself with getting Wahid elected, adding, "I did not give him a blank cheque to do whatever he wanted after taking office."

Rais's threats to remove Wahid from office, and his opposition to Wahid's calls to lift the decades-old ban on communism in Indonesia have brought counter threats from Wahid's National Awakening Party (PKB). PKB Deputy Secretary-General Yahya C. Staquf April 19 said his party would call for a new speaker of the MPR to replace Rais, who they also link to the Jihad planning to go to Maluku.

In addition to his own party, Wahid has another powerful ally in countering a threat from the Central Axis and Rais the military. Following widespread rumors of plans to unseat Wahid in a special MPR session, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Tyasno Sudarto reportedly said that the armed forces would resist any political effort to topple Wahid, as he is the constitutionally elected head of Indonesia. Not only has the military pledged to protect Wahid, the navy has also promised to stop any attempt by the Laskar Jihad to reach Maluku.

Besides widening the gap between Wahid and Rais and strengthening ties between Wahid and the military, the threatened Jihad is also further weakening Megawati and her PDI-P. Megawati has faced growing challenges from inside PDI-P as the party transitions from an opposition organization to one in power. Eros Djarot, a key PDI-P challenger to Megawati, told a meeting of the Alliance of Independent Journalists that Party politicking was hampering Megawati's ability to deal with issues of national importance.

Djarot, citing Wahid's mandate to Megawati that it was her responsibility to settle unrest in Maluku and Irian Jaya, told journalists, "she's not ready to do that. She has not formed a team to outline and manage a clear plan to carry out the president's mandate." With Megawati responsible for security in Maluku, but preoccupied with internal party factions, the Laskar Jihad has only added fuel to her challengers' rhetoric, who point to her inaction in Maluku and pre-occupation with PDI-P politics as a serious weakness.

The internal splits in PDI-P and the rising tensions between Indonesia's main Muslim factions are all likely to come to a head as the first wave of the Laskar Jihad attempts to arrive in Maluku Easter Sunday. The threat of the arrival is likely in itself to further strain religious tensions in the province. With the military preparing to block their arrival, a clash between the Muslim volunteers and the armed forces may be impending. Further, Laskar Jihad has warned that if it is blocked from reaching



Maluku, it will hold a Jihad on Java.

The links between Laskar Jihad and the Central Axis will further polarize Indonesia's military from the more extreme Muslim Parties. It will at the same time enhance the alliance between Wahid and the military. Wahid's focus on military restructuring and reform has been matched by an interest to modernize the force, both politically and technically. While this led to serious strains between Wahid and several military commanders, reconciliation is under way.

Further, for the military, supporting Wahid is the most ideal option. While Wahid's popular power base comes from Indonesia's moderate Muslims, he has established and maintained ties across the spectrum of Indonesia's elite, where he carries out his political deals. Contrarily, the military is concerned about the possible leadership of Rais or the Central Axis, which wields its power through tacit or open support of extremist Muslims. As well, as long as Megawati continues to base her support on the ability to call forth the masses in the streets as a demonstration of her popular mandate, this too runs counter to the military's overarching goal of national stability.

A familiar shape is returning to Indonesia's government. Wahid, backed by the military, is courting the support of Golkar, the party of former President Suharto. Despite being weakened by its links to Suharto, Golkar still represents a substantial part of Indonesia's bureaucracy following decades of virtually unopposed rule.

The formation of the Wahid's PKB-Golkar-military bloc will spur attempts by Rais and Megawati to form an opposition alliance. However, such an alliance would be inherently weak due to fundamental differences in support and goals.

While the Laskar Jihad in itself is not a significant force in Indonesia, its formation is spurring the change in Indonesia's political leadership. With PDI-P and Megawati hampered by infighting and Rais and the Central Axis supporting potentially destabilizing activities, Wahid, backed by the military and likely in alliance with the Golkar bureaucracy, will emerge with a firmer grasp on power. While the return to a semi-autocratic system may slow Indonesia's transition to Western ideals of democracy, it may instead help to maintain Indonesia's national stability.

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