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## Moderates tackle both extremism and Islamophobia

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Muslim women attend a mass prayer at a mosque in Jakarta. © Reuters

**JAKARTA** The rise of Islamophobia in the West is making Indonesia's religious moderates and "comprehensive" approach to fighting extremism more relevant than ever.

In late November, two weeks after the deadly terrorist attacks in Paris, Indonesia's largest Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama, launched a video campaign aimed at countering extremist ideology. International media hailed the video as a call for tolerance that could eventually help undermine the Islamic State, the militant group behind the attacks.

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population, and NU, with an estimated 40 million members, is the largest Muslim group in the world.

"Today a group of people think as though they were the most righteous. They claim to act on behalf of the religion and wreak havoc," said Muhammad Muslih, an executive of GP Ansor, the youth wing of NU, during the film's launch in Yogyakarta province.

The 90-minute film, titled "Rahmat Islam Nusantara" (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam), urges Muslims not to take too rigid a view of Islamic scripture and to put more focus on the human side of Islam. The film encourages them to follow in the footsteps of the wali songo, the nine earliest propagators of Islam on the island of Java who are said to have spread the religion through peaceful means, allowing assimilation with the local culture.

Organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah -- Indonesia's second-largest Muslim group, with an estimated 20 million followers -- have been working together with the Indonesian government to promote tolerance and curb extremism among Indonesian Muslims, who represent 85% of the country's total population of 250 million.

The majority of Indonesian Muslims self-identify as moderates, practicing a local brand of Islam that is generally less restrictive and more inclusive than its Middle Eastern counterparts.

While several hard-line groups do exist in the country, most are nonviolent and they form only a tiny fraction of Indonesia's population.

Followers of IS are apparently even smaller in number. In November, Indonesian police said 384 Indonesian nationals are confirmed as having joined the extremist group in Syria, while 46 others have returned to the archipelago after visiting Syria and are now being closely monitored by security officers.

The actual numbers may be higher, but police say that so far they are not worried about the possibility of "IS graduates" launching attacks in the country, citing their "low capacity" to do so. Several Indonesians arrested by the local authorities upon coming back from Syria earlier in 2015 said they abandoned IS after it failed to pay them as much as promised.



Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (Photo by Bobby Nugroho)

**STRIKING A BALANCE** Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, speaking to the Nikkei Asian Review in mid-December, said partnerships with local Muslim groups are an important part of Indonesia's "comprehensive" counterterrorism strategy that balances the use of hard power with "religiously and culturally sensitive approaches."

"Security measures should not [mean] blindly attacking. Counterterrorism doesn't always have to mean direct armed confrontations. Promoting tolerance and pluralism is equally important -- this is what differentiates Indonesia from other nations," Marsudi said when asked whether Indonesia

would join some other countries in the military strikes against IS militants in Syria.

"We're lucky because we have Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah who, together with the government, continue to voice the importance of tolerance, pluralism, moderateness," she added.

At the same time, Marsudi said, Indonesia has dealt with several terrorism incidents since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S., and the country has emerged as a "center of excellence" for regional law enforcement efforts to combat terrorism.

The Jakarta Center for Law Enforcement Cooperation, which deals with transnational crimes including terrorism, has trained 18,000 law enforcement officers from other countries in Southeast Asia since opening in 2004, according to the minister.

The latest result of such efforts came over the weekend of Dec. 19. As of Dec. 21, the police said they have arrested nine people with explosive materials and "jihad manuals" in their possession. About half of the suspects are reported to be supporters or sympathizers of IS, while the remainder are linked to terrorist network Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian affiliate of al-Qaida.

**SAME COIN** Local Muslim scholar Fajar Riza UI Haq, however, described the complex challenges Indonesia faces in promoting its tolerant brand of Islam.

First, he said, the Western world tends to see Islam as a homogeneous entity typified by the strict, conservative Middle East.

Second, some Muslims, faced with the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe and the U.S., do feel mistreated and cornered, and they often fail to see the West as being composed of different actors with different attitudes toward Muslims -- some hostile and others sympathetic.

"Islamophobia arises from these two factors -- how the West treats Islam, and how Muslims treat non-Muslims," said UI Haq, who is also executive director of the Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity, a Jakarta-based Islamic think tank.

"NU and Muhammadiyah of Indonesia are trying to address these two sides of the coin," he said.

Muhammadiyah, of which UI Haq is a member, has been actively involved in international interfaith forums, he added, citing the World Peace Forum it has organized five times since 2006 as an example.

Expanding such outreach efforts, though, requires the government's support, something UI Haq said is still lacking.

One of the most pressing tasks, he said, is to deal with conservative groups in the country whose anti-Western sentiments are starting to gain traction on social media. Members of some of these groups have been posting messages online claiming that Western media reports on atrocities committed by IS militants in Iraq and Syria are just anti-Islam propaganda. Such messages have been receiving "likes" and comments of agreement.

"I have seen that slowly, post-Paris attacks, some Muslims begin to think that ISIS seems to be only one who can fight the West," UI Haq said, referring to the IS group by its commonly used acronym.

"At a time when Muslims feel cornered and marginalized, some begin to see ISIS as some kind of a hero. This is dangerous," he added.

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