

The Dynamics of the Philippines Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Policies in the Context of ASEAN Cooperation

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, ASEAN has grown as a breeding ground for the development of terrorist networks, both from the Middle East and those born within the ASEAN region. The Philippines, as one of the ASEAN member countries, is directly confronted with this threat. Using qualitative methods and a descriptive-analytic approach, this article discusses the dynamics of the threat in the Philippines by looking at the terrorism index, the growth of networks and attacks, and how the Philippines collaborates within the context of ASEAN to confront the threat. This paper concludes that the existing data shows that the dynamics of terrorism in the Philippines are on a relatively upward trend. In response, the Philippine government continues to develop its counter-terrorism policies by strengthening legal and regulatory aspects, establishing an authority to handle terrorism, and employing social approaches. In terms of cooperation, the Philippines is also striving to collaborate with fellow ASEAN member countries as well as countries outside the ASEAN region.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism, The Philippines, ASEAN*

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia in the last two decades has undeniably become a breeding ground for terrorism, both for terrorist groups whose networks come from outside Southeast Asia, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, and those who are born and bred in Southeast Asia, such as Jama'ah Islamiyah. In terms of terrorism based on religion, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia can be said to be the triangle of massive terrorism spread. In the context of terrorism, the Philippines is one of the countries with a significant level of threat. The Philippines has faced terrorism threats for decades, with terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Maute Group, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) being the most active. In addition, other groups such as the New People's Army (NPA) and a number of armed groups in Mindanao are also involved in conflicts that often involve acts of violence and terror attacks.

After the defeat of ISIS in 2019, for example, a number of returnees have built a new power by making the Philippines their "new area of power". According to Richard Javad Heydarian, a Philippine academic, ISIS did not choose Indonesia or Malaysia, which have Islamic dominance, as their new territory. In fact, the selection of ISIS for an emir was not taken from either of them, but from the Philippines. Given the challenge of these threats, without forgetting the enormity of the challenges faced by other ASEAN countries, the Philippines is a country that is crucial for the development of terrorists.

The Philippine government has made various efforts to deal with the threat of terrorism, including military operations and diplomatic efforts with militant groups. Nonetheless, the threat of terrorism remains a serious challenge to security and stability in the Philippines. The Philippines has issued the Human Security Act in 2007, which defines terrorism as an act that causes widespread and extraordinary fear and panic among the public. The first group to be officially registered as a terrorist organization was Abu Sayyaf on September 10, 2015, by a court in the province of Basilan (GCERF, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODS

Through qualitative methods, this paper was written using a descriptive-analytical approach. Several literary sources such as reports, and other relevant references are referred to during the writing process. In general, qualitative methods seek to reveal a phenomenon to be described. In this paper, the phenomenon that is disclosed is how the threat of terrorism is in the Philippines, and how the response and handling is carried out by the Philippines. This paper elaborates how existing data reveals the threat of terrorism in the Philippines, as well as efforts made by Philippine authorities to combat this terrorism. The threat of terrorism is explained to show the fact that among Asean countries, the Philippines is an important part of the country's territory which is directly affected by the spread of terrorism, both developing from the Asean region itself and those coming from outside such as foreign fighters. Then the efforts made by the Philippines are described to show real efforts to handle and draw correlations with the context of cooperation in handling at the Asean level. The presentation of this paper is then elaborated in three key discussions: the dynamics of terrorism in the Philippines, policy responses, and regional cooperation within ASEAN to combat terrorism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of Terrorism Threats in The Philippines

In the 2022 Global Terrorism Index annual report released by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the Philippines ranked 16th out of over 95 countries. The country is classified as having a high level of terrorism threat, making it the only Southeast Asian nation on that scale. Compared to Indonesia, in the past twenty years (since 2002), the trend and graph of terrorist threat levels in Indonesia have tended to decrease, while the trend in the Philippines can be considered relatively increasing. Although fluctuations in the terrorism index have been recorded from 2013 to 2019, the data still shows a higher index than that of 2002-2012, as depicted in Table 1 below. However, it should be noted that the number of deaths in the Philippines has decreased for the second consecutive year, from 97 deaths in 2020 to 53 deaths in 2021 due to terrorism. Overall, the Philippines has had the highest death rate in the past decade, with over 1,000 cases out of 3,250 deaths due to terrorism in the country (GTI, 2022).

For years, the Philippines has been struggling to address various threats posed by extremist and separatist groups that engage in terrorism and violence in the southern part of the country. One of these is a long-standing independence movement that has led to the formation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) (GCERF, 2022). At the end of 2021, President Duterte signed a law extending the BARMM transition period until 2025, postponing the first regional parliament election. This was achieved after a tense process of peaceful negotiations between the central government and the separatist groups. Although this can be seen as a step forward in creating peace, violent extremist groups, including local groups inspired by ISIS, continue to operate and recruit new members to gain sympathy.

There are at least three important triggers for the above-mentioned events, as revealed by researchers from the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF): dissatisfaction with the government's performance that continues to grow and increase, especially in the BARMM region, unresolved agrarian/land conflicts between different groups, and inequality and discrimination faced by Muslim community members in the region.

In terms of genealogy, terrorism dynamics in the Philippines come from two sources: those that arise domestically and those that emerge or develop due to the influence of terrorist

networks from outside the country. In its development, the influence of terrorist networks from outside the Philippines adds to the complexity of the threats that exist and becomes a force that is increasing until now. There are at least six terrorist groups and networks in the Philippines that have raised higher alertness, namely the Abu Sayyaf Group, Jama'ah Islamiyah, Maute Group, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Moro National Liberation Front, Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (Sitorus, 2017).

Four out of six of these groups can be categorized as right-wing or jihadist terrorists. The other two are left-wing or extremist-nationalist terrorist groups. Of the many groups, there are some that have pledged allegiance or acknowledged the ISIS caliphate, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group. Meanwhile, Jama'ah Islamiyah not only grew in the Philippines, but also in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. In terms of structure, Jama'ah Islamiyah in the Philippines is part of Manthiqi III, which includes Mindanao/Philippines, Sabah, East Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. Although in mid-2019 to 2020, according to CSIS sources, Jama'ah Islamiyah has changed its structure from three to two Manthiqi. The forms of terror and crimes committed include kidnapping (including against Indonesian nationals), robbery, bombing, suicide bombings, and so on.

Philippine Counterterrorism Policy

After the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the global War on Terror campaign, the Philippines responded by taking measures to counter terrorism. These efforts included enacting laws and policies against terrorism, collaborating with other countries to combat terrorism, and establishing organizations specifically devoted to counterterrorism. In addition to the legal-formal approach, the Philippines also involved the role of communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

a. Law enforcement

Counterterrorism efforts through laws were carried out by passing the national Republic Act 9372 or the Human Security Act 2007 (HSA 2007), which specifically covers acts of terrorism in the Philippines (Salazar, 2010). Other criminal acts, such as hijacking in waters, rebellion, murder, kidnapping or illegal detention, crimes that cause destruction, arson, and the illegal use and possession of weapons, are categorized as terrorism under this law.

b. Institutional Arrangements

On the institutional side, the Philippines has the Armed Forces of Philippines Internal Peace and Security Plan. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is the national military force of the Philippines, established since 1935. According to Republic Act No. 8551, responsibility for internal security was transferred to the Department of National Defense (DND) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The Philippine military has separated the AFP Internal Peace and Security Plan (AFP IPSP) into a special organization. The IPSP is a plan and strategy developed by the AFP to address all forms of threats to national security and create a peaceful and stable situation in the Philippines. The IPSP is also the special agency that handles terrorist acts committed by the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jamaah Islamiyah.

c. Social-Community Approach

In addition to law enforcement and state authority in facing terrorism, the Philippines has also implemented policies that involve communities and NGOs through social and community approaches, both domestic and foreign. For example, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) has partnered with at least 21

organizations or institutions in the Philippines, ranging from education, think tanks, to religious organizations.

The Synergeia Foundation, for example, a GCERF partner in the Philippines since 2019, has an innovative model and approach to improving governance in the Philippines regarding complaints or dissatisfaction with the government as the main driver of extremism that leads to terrorism (as previously mentioned). Synergeia has created a network of mayors and governors that adopt good governance models, which they build by focusing on an approach that can "listen" to community complaints and desires and ensure that programs are designed participatively using sustainable frameworks.

They have built strong relationships with and among the mayors and provide them with funding and technical support, as well as connecting them with the private sector that can contribute resources to local communities. One mayor refers to Synergeia as an 'app store' because they can request the technical assistance they need, and Synergeia will provide the tools and expertise. Synergeia then monitors the mayors using quantitative performance indicators (such as literacy rates) and clearly sees the success of their methods and approaches. By using the two-way change theory that recognizes the importance of top-down and bottom-up governance, they also work with communities to enhance their capacity to express their needs and willingness.

The Philippines in the Context of ASEAN Counterterrorism Cooperation

In terms of counterterrorism cooperation, the Philippines has engaged in various partnerships, both with ASEAN member states and with countries outside the region. In 2002, the Philippines established a partnership with the United States through a military cooperation called the Joint Special Operation Task Forces Philippines (JSOTF-P). This collaboration involved training the Philippine military and sharing intelligence information. The United States considers the Philippines an important partner in the Global War on Terror in Southeast Asia.

Apart from partnering with the United States in counterterrorism efforts, the Philippines has also invited and sought the support of ASEAN member states to jointly combat terrorism. Regional cooperation in counterterrorism is carried out through the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism and the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting. Several declarations and conventions have been undertaken by ASEAN to address the threat and actions of terrorism, including:

Table 1: List of ASEAN declarations on the terrorism threat
(adapted from various sources)

No.	Declaraton	Year
1	ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terorism	5 November 2001
2	Joint Communique of the Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Terrorism	21 Mei 2002
3	Declaration on Terrorism by The 8 th ASEAN Summit	3 November 2002
4	Bali Regional Ministerial Meeting on Counter Terrorism	5 February 2004
5	ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (ACCT)	13 January 2007

In addition to declarations and conventions, ASEAN also implements several strategies to facilitate counterterrorism actions, including the establishment of special bodies such as the ASEANAPOL, the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and counterterrorism partnerships with advanced countries that have expertise in counterterrorism such as the United States, India, Japan, Canada, and Australia. In 2009, as a

follow-up to the signing of the ACCT convention, the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan Action on Counter Terrorism (ACPoA-CT) was drafted. These action plans serve as a guide for ASEAN in implementing counterterrorism at the regional level. ASEAN respects the principle of sovereignty in its relationships among its members, so cooperation in combating terrorist activities is not like a defense pact, but is conducted through intelligence information exchanges and capacity building of law enforcement agencies (Namora, 2016).

In addition to ACCT, ASEAN also facilitates ASEAN member states in addressing terrorism through the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transactional Crime (AMMTC) and the Senior Official Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) as an implementation of the previous convention. Through AMMTC and SOMTC, the Working Group Discussion on Counter Terrorism (WG-CT) was formed among law enforcement officials of ASEAN member states, which has a role in providing counterterrorism strategies and action plans for further discussion at a higher level. Some important meetings that have been held at the Senior Official level to discuss terrorism response include:

- a. In 2011 in Singapore, where a counterterrorism strategy was established for implementation by Southeast Asian countries through the strengthening of national capabilities by training law enforcement agencies and increasing cooperation among law enforcement institutions of member states.
- b. In 2012 in Thailand, where a counterterrorism strategy was established through the strengthening of national law in each member state and an agreement to conduct joint training using the Training Center on Counterterrorism facilities owned by ASEAN.
- c. In 2013 in Vietnam, where ASEAN member states made efforts to improve and effectively implement rehabilitation and counter-radicalization programs for captured terrorists.

In Indonesia itself, the Philippines has strengthened its cooperation in counterterrorism for the fourth time with the establishment of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Combating International Terrorism Philippines-Indonesia. This forum is important to enhance the security policy roles of the two countries, where terrorism challenges have interconnected aspects and also because of their close geographical proximity, which allows terrorist groups to move around with difficulty in detection (BNPT, 2022).

From the description above, it can be seen that ASEAN is trying to accommodate the interests of its members, especially in addressing transnational crimes, such as terrorism. ASEAN's initiatives in tackling terrorism are more tangible in the form of conventions, which have a legally binding status. As a result, member countries that have ratified these conventions and have made them national laws have a great responsibility to implement the results of these conventions in their respective countries (Isnanto, 2014). The various strategies that the Philippines has implemented in addressing terrorism are one of the results of the ASEAN convention, which was later ratified and became a national law, in addition to ratifying the results of other terrorism conventions.

CONCLUSION

The presentation above summarizes at least three important things. First, terrorism dynamics in the Philippines have grown massively. In addition to the gathering of returnees from Iraq and Syria, previous terrorist groups and JI networks that have developed in Southeast Asia have become part of this dynamic. Second, the Philippines implements counterterrorism efforts through four steps: law and institutions, social and community, as well as foreign

cooperation. Third, in cooperation within the ASEAN region, the Philippines is part of the ASEAN counterterrorism cooperation network, both in the context of ASEAN as a regional organization and cooperation among ASEAN member states.

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