

# Effective Strategic Communication in Countering Radicalism in Indonesia



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## Executive Summary

A major problem with the Indonesian government's efforts to counter radical ideology is lack of effective strategic communication in winning broader public support for their goals. This paper analyzes the level of effectiveness with which the Indonesian National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) has managed to deliver its message to target audiences in order to shape their opinions and behaviors towards radical ideology. This analysis emphasizes particularly the government's recent shut down of alleged radical Islamic websites. This study shows that BNPT's hardline programs managed to decrease the number of terrorists and weaken their networks. However, these counterradicalism programs have failed to convincingly involve the broader Muslim population to motivate them to challenge radical ideology, which remains pervasive in the public sphere. In order for the government to effectively shape people's minds and behavior with regard to the threat of radicalism, it is necessary to ensure the clarity of the message, to enhance understanding of the target audience, and to maximize use of different channels of communication.

## Introduction

Based on Antiterrorism Law No. 15 of 2003, the BNPT carried out law enforcement actions against nearly 1,000 suspected terrorists, confiscating their weapons across the archipelago over the past decade. As a result, Indonesia today is less susceptible to major terrorist attacks than it was in the early 2000s.

In addition to harsh measures, the BNPT also carried out softer measures aimed at preventing terrorist attacks in the future. These methods rely on two distinct strategies. The first may be characterized as "deradicalization," used to change the behavior of captured terrorists and their families from radical to less radical, or moderate. The second may be characterized as "counterradicalism," which aims to prevent other segments of society from being radicalized and seeks to influence radical ideology and behavior. Until 2012, the BNPT used the term deradicalization to signify both strategies. Many individuals

in Indonesia, particularly the radicals, questioned whether this meant that the government deemed all Muslims to be radical, necessitating their deradicalization.<sup>1</sup>

In their efforts to launch a counterradicalism agenda, the BNPT has communicated with many groups of people, mainly Muslim scholars (*ulama*), academics at Islamic universities, and leaders of Islamic mass organizations to raise awareness of the threat of radicalism to social and national security and ask them to speak out against it. Concerned with the danger created by on-line Islamic radical ideology, the BNPT recommended in 2015 that the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (Keminfo) shut down 22 alleged Islamic radical websites.

This decision soon caused public controversy. A number of people, including moderate Muslim leaders, questioned the underlying reasons for this measure. As a result, the decision was quickly overturned due to strong public resistance.<sup>2</sup> This controversial case shows a lack of clarity and direction in the government's communication strategy.

This study analyzes the level, to which the BNPT has been able to effectively communicate counterradical ideas since its establishment in 2010. Referring to other best practices and relevant communication theories, the author will make recommendations as to how the Indonesian government may improve its strategic communication to gain greater public support for its counterradicalism initiatives.

Through deradicalization programs, the BNPT has managed to transform some key figures — convicted terrorists and jihadists — into moderate or less radical individuals. Former terrorists, such as Ali Imron, Ali Fauzi, Nasir Abbas and others, have been involved in various public awareness campaigns run by the government and aimed at countering terrorism. While credit must be given for this success, there remains evidence showing that counterradicalism efforts, that constitute a major component of BNPT's programs, have been ineffective in convincing the larger public to challenge radical ideas and to appreciate these ideas' threat to security.

One of the contributing factors leading to this inefficacy has been the BNPT's lack of an overarching strategic communication agenda in their counterradicalism campaigns. Strategic communication is not just simply the communication of information. It aims to change beliefs and behavior. From a practitioners' perspective, it is a "systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational, and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behavior."<sup>3</sup>

Given this strategic communication framework, the BNPT has lacked clarity in the definition of radical ideology and to what extent ideology can threaten national security. Additionally, they have yet to prioritize their target audiences in terms of their needs and

<sup>1</sup> V. Arianti and Nur Irfani Sariipi, "Indonesia's Counter Radicalisation Programme: Challenges from the Radicals" *RSIS COMMENTARIES* 001 (2012): 2, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/1663-indonesias-counter-radicali/#.VUc9D9x5FIE>

<sup>2</sup> Amal Nur Ngajis and Agus Tri Haryanto, "Pemerintah Buka 12 Situs Islam yang diblokir," *Viva.co.id*, April 9, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://teknologi.news.viva.co.id/news/read/611803-pemerintah-buka-12-situs-islam-yang-diblokir> Laurel Benny Saron Silalahi, "Mahfudh MD: Pemblokiran situs Islam harus lewat putusan pengadilan," *merdeka.com*, March 31, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/mahfud-md-pemblokiran-situs-islam-harus-lewat-putusan-pengadilan.html>

<sup>3</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay, *Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism and Strategic Communication and the United Nations*, (the Netherlands: Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013), 13, accessed April 24, 2015, [http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013\\_CT\\_StratComm.pdf](http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013_CT_StratComm.pdf)

key messages they are entitled to receive. Finally, the government has failed to maximize and operationalize the availability of different channels of communication.

### Working with Audiences

Since its inception in July 2010, the BNPT has been aware of the need for having broader audiences involved in their counterradicalism project. Among other target groups, religious leaders (*ulama*) are considered to be among the main priorities. Other audiences to be taken into account are youth, students, and social leaders. Since there is no formal document provided by the agency that can be used to identify the format of its communication plan, media reports serve as the best available source on the agency's engagement with different stakeholders.

Based on this research, it remains questionable as to whether the BNPT has analyzed all possible audiences, placed them into different categories, and worked with them accordingly. A good number of well-known ulamas were involved in seminars and dialogues both on-line and off-line to explain the true meaning of jihad and to correct misleading interpretations propagated by radical ulama. While at times, religious leaders were considered the main target group, it is not clear whether they were taken as key players in terms of a direct target audience or were selected to represent the BNPT in communicating their messages.

Academics and their students on various campuses in Indonesia are also primary audiences for BNPT's counterradicalism programs. From 2011 to 2014, the agency targeted universities often belonging to the Religious Affairs Ministry. These included the Islamic State University (UIN) and the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN), which spread out across the archipelago. As a consequence, however, this shift in orientation caused the BNPT to decrease their communication and cooperation with other target audiences. The reason behind this policy is likely connected to the arrest of a terrorist, Pepi Fernando, who was suspected to have prepared a bomb to be exploded at the Church of Christ Cathedral, Serpong, Banten Province. Fernando, a drop-out student of State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (UIN Jakarta), was arrested by Detachment 88 (Densus 88) in Aceh, April 21, 2011.

Following his arrest, Fernando received an 18-year prison sentence from the West Jakarta District Court on March 5, 2012, for masterminding a series of mail bomb attacks targeting public figures. He was found guilty under Chapter 15, Article 6 of Law No. 15/2003 on terrorism.<sup>4</sup> This case created an element of surprise among the Muslim public. This was, in part, because UIN Jakarta, where Pepi was listed as a student, has been well-regarded as a progressive Islamic campus that has managed to promote reform in Islamic thought. This led the agency to pay closer attention to campuses as important target audiences. Following this case, the BNPT involved UIN, IAIN, and privately owned universities to cooperate in countering radical ideology through activities that are mostly relevant to university students and academics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Feri Simon Santosa, "Mail Bomb Leader Sentenced to 18 Years in Prison," *the Jakarta Post*, March 05, 2012, accessed April 29, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/03/05/mail-bomb-leader-sentenced-18-years-prison.html>

<sup>5</sup> One of the examples of such cooperation was a seminar and signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the BNPT and UIN Sunan Gunung Jati Bandung. The seminar was entitled 'the Role of University and Countering Radicalism and Terrorism'. The signed MoU was part of cooperation to hold seminars, training and education on counterterrorism. See "UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Jalin Kerjasama dengan BNPT," accessed on April 24, 2015, <http://www.bnpt.go.id/berita.php?id=53&token=0239b276595300cf336260dd6bfefd33>.

With regard to the universities, the BNPT also signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council), a private organization that preeminently representative of Indonesian Muslims' stands and opinions on various issues related to Islam. The MOU signifies both parties' willingness to cooperate on these issues. The extent to which both parties managed to put the plan into practice remains in question.

Furthermore, the BNPT chose to continuously take part in discussing issues related to certain concepts of Islam that are believed to be misinterpreted by terrorists instead of allowing the ulama to independently discuss them among themselves. Critics have observed that in 2010 to 2012 the BNPT preferred to ensure the visibility of the agency and its officers in programs rather than to secure their credibility by giving more control of the discourse to the stakeholders at the community level. The result has been that the agency has continuously opened itself up to confrontation with radicals.<sup>6</sup>

Given these circumstances, it has not been easy for the BNPT to win and sustain public trust, particularly given the fact that it is a government agency. Even when the government allows the ulama to independently discuss and explain the true meaning of jihad and the essence of tolerance in Islamic teaching, resistance persists within the Muslim public given that the ulama are seen as being funded by the government. Concerns remain that the government is using the ulama to discredit Islam. Were the BNPT to give local communities more independence to run these programs, while controlling its own visibility, it would have greater success in lessening public resistance.<sup>7</sup>

As an illustrative case, BNPT's cooperation with Lazuardi Birru, a Jakarta-based non-governmental organization working on peace and security issues, proved to be a good model of community-based approach in countering radicalism. Lazuardi Birru, though newly established, acted as the BNPT's sub-agency or representative to communicate its mission to a specific target group through relevant messages and communication channels. While keeping a low profile, the agency allowed Lazuardi Birru to be seen as representing a group of Muslim youth rather than the state agency. This, in turn, bolstered the NGO's credibility to engage with youth as their main audience. Having more independence in creative implementation of its programs, Lazuardi Birru managed to involve various relevant stakeholders as team members in their counterradicalism-related projects. This created broader ownership of the project.

Working with various research centers, Lazuardi Birru conducted studies on radical networks in Indonesia and root causes of conflicts involving those networks. Based on its research, the NGO made recommendations to run programs involving specific groups such as young preachers (*muballigh/dai muda*), young teachers, and students.<sup>8</sup> One example of the variety of programs it carried out was training of young preachers in preaching Islam as a religion of compassion and love (*Islam rahmatan lil'alamien*). The program involving

<sup>6</sup> Arianti and Saripi, "Indonesia's Counter Radicalisation."

<sup>7</sup> A case study of England is a good example of a lesson learned. A London-based website called Radical Middle Way campaigning a peaceful and tolerant Islam received strong criticism from some Muslim groups because it published at the outset that they received financial support from the British government. Naureen Chowdhury Fink & Jack Barclay: *Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism Strategic Communication and the United Nations*, p.34  
[http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013\\_CT\\_StratComm.pdf](http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013_CT_StratComm.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See <http://lazuardi-birru.blogspot.com/>; <https://www.facebook.com/IslamDiDadaku?ref=stream&fref=nf>;  
<https://twitter.com/IslamDiDadaku>

hundreds of young preachers in Jakarta and surrounding areas proved to be a sound strategy to counter radical narratives by creating a moderate Islamic narrative.

Not only did the program strengthen the participants' capacity to defend themselves against the extremists' narrative; it also empowered them to speak out against radical behavior and ideas. Furthermore, it enabled these communities to build knowledge and tools intended to limit the expansion of radical networks. In short, it managed to combine counterradical ideology and counterradical mobilization.<sup>9</sup> In spite of its effectiveness and well-grounded cooperation, Lazuardi Birru ended cooperation with the BNPT as the latter began to emphasize its own visibility and sole control of the NGO's programs.

Media reports from 2010 to 2014 suggest the weakening of terrorist networks in Indonesia due to successful operation of Densus 88 in conducting arrests and confiscating weapons. Nevertheless, small terrorist attacks continue to take place in different areas with varying targets and tactics, to include traditional suicide bombings. These incidents provide evidence that terrorist actions and networks continue to exist and are marked by new forms and configurations. Hence, counterradical ideology also needs to evolve and expand. It is necessary to continue the work of raising awareness regarding terrorist networks and ideas that remain pervasive and continue to threaten people and national security. There is also a greater demand for a wider counterradicalism network that can effectively reach out to all regions and provinces.

To meet this need, the BNPT has established a new organization, Forum Koordinasi Penanggulangan Terorisme or *Coordinating Forum for Counterterrorism* (FKPT). The FKPT was launched in 2013, initially covering 18 provinces, but eventually expanding to 26. The FKPT brings together religious and social leaders, cultural activist, youth, and women. Moreover, the BNPT recently held a national meeting of the FKPT. The latter serves as the BNPT's outreach hand at provincial and regency levels.<sup>10</sup> As the FKPT is new, the question remains as to whether it is effective in carrying out BNPT's regional mission. It merits further scrutiny, however, as a potential means of enhancing BNPT legitimacy in regional projects and outreach.

### Messaging Counterradicalism

The extent to which the BNPT has managed to effectively communicate its message to audiences depends on the level of credibility of the messengers or the representatives. Lack of clarity of ideas behind their messages also subtracts from their effectiveness in meeting the needs of target audiences. This hinders BNPT's communication strategy primarily due to the poor ability of representatives to effectively communicate their messages. As a result, the speakers are perceived with incredulity and skepticism by the audiences. Secondly, there is no clear strategy on how these messages are being communicated in terms of deciding which messages should go to which audiences.

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<sup>9</sup> "Pelatihan DKM dan Dai Muda", accessed April 17, 2015, <http://www.csrc.or.id/berita-156-pelatihan-dkm-dan-dai-muda.html>. According to the American Bipartisan Policy Centre as quoted by Schmid, objectives of counterradicalisation can be defined by three opposing dynamics of radicalization - grievances, ideology, and mobilization. See Alex P Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *ICCT The Hague Research Paper* (2013), The Hague, ICCT, March 2013, p.51, accessed April 16, 2015, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Apriadi Gunawan, "BNPT sets up antiterrorism forum in North Sumatera," *the Jakarta Post*, November 30, 2012, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/11/30/bnpt-sets-anti-terrorism-forum-north-sumatra.html>

Finally, generalized messages on the danger of radical groups and their ideas have been repeatedly sent to the general public. However, it is not clear whether the BNPT has balanced its public-oriented messages - that are often general and sporadic - with tailored messaging that is specific and frequent. Doing so would go a long way towards better shaping the minds and behaviors of audiences. This provides a rationale as to why the case of the BNPT partnership with Lazuardi Birru is so important and can serve as a template for enhanced domestic counterterrorism initiatives. Table 1 below is an example of how the BNPT categorizes its messages, ideas and opinions for different audiences.

**Table 1**<sup>11</sup>

No	Audiences	Messages	Representatives	Objectives	Resources
1	General public	Extremists use religion to divide people	The BNPT expert	Counter extremist ideology	<a href="http://damailahindonesiaku.com/bnpt-agama-dipakai-ekstrimis-untuk-adu-domba.html">http://damailahindonesiaku.com/bnpt-agama-dipakai-ekstrimis-untuk-adu-domba.html</a> April 29 2015
2	General public and specific audiences of elites	"ISIS acts as a new umbrella of old terrorists"	The BNPT leader	Exposing and counter ideology	<a href="http://print.kompas.com/baca/KOMPAS_ART000000000000000008540475Kompas.com">http://print.kompas.com/baca/KOMPAS_ART000000000000000008540475Kompas.com</a> 29 August 2014
3.	On-line practitioners and bloggers	Countering radicalism in on-line media	Journalist, expert in technology and information	Counter ideology	<a href="http://www.wartanusantara.com/2015/03/bnpt-ajak-media-online-dan-blogger.html">http://www.wartanusantara.com/2015/03/bnpt-ajak-media-online-dan-blogger.html</a>
4	Public	Radicalism enter campuses	BNPT	Counter ideology	<a href="http://damailahindonesiaku.com/bnpt-soroti-sejumlah-kampus-terkait-penyusupan-radikalisme.html">http://damailahindonesiaku.com/bnpt-soroti-sejumlah-kampus-terkait-penyusupan-radikalisme.html</a> April 28 2015

Since 2010, Lazuardi Birru has used a variety of communication channels targeting youth as their main audience. Their media outreach programs have included posters, essays, traditional Malay poetry (*pantun*), comics, photography, and short stories. They have managed to attract young people's attention and interest by conducting competitions in the mentioned outreach programs, in which thousands of youth have taken part. The winners have received prizes, and their work has been published and distributed to the broader public to great effect.

While the measures of this program's impact requires further scrutiny, its overall scale and popularity suggests that it was successful in reaching its primary audience and in delivering counter-narrative messages. Another benefit of this program has been that it involves multiple groups and is not limited to the BNPT as the leading actor of counterradicalism. It reflects operationalization of the BNPT's claim that counterterrorism is the responsibility of all segments of society and state agencies.

Lazuardi Birru has also been active on-line using a counter-narrative that differs in some ways from that of BNPT. Their Facebook page<sup>12</sup> has been successful in garnering 2,537,514 likes. They also have a Twitter account<sup>13</sup> launched in 2010 with 7,767 followers.

<sup>11</sup> Authors independent research

<sup>12</sup> Lazuardi Birru's Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/IslamdiDadaku>

<sup>13</sup> Lazuardi Birru's Twitter page can be found here: <https://twitter.com/islamdidadaku>

The NGO has also been influential in using more attractive and enticing content to engage young people in dialogue through their social media pages. Among their creative narratives is a comic entitled “Ketika Nurani Bicara,” which began publication in 2010. Its main message is that when a human honestly hears his or her conscience, he or she will not accept any notion that condones attacking or killing, even if the action is seen to be motivated by truth and justice.

The comic uses intensive research and in-depth interviews with three actors, including terrorists involved in the 2002 Bali bombings. Among them is Alim Imron who supported the terrorist team Bambang Priyanto, who, in the progression of the comic, expresses his deep sorrow for the Bali bombings victims and sympathy for thousands of volunteers who responded to the atrocity.<sup>14</sup>

Among the slogans that have successfully accompanied such comics are the following:

- “Islam is the religion of compassion and love for mankind (rahmatan lil ‘alamien)”
- Nuzulul Qur’an commemoration used the theme of peace and its relation to Islam, “Spring Peace in the Month of Ramadhan”
- “Pray for Indonesia”
- “Islam is Peace,” “Islam Loving Peace Religion”
- “The Prophet did call for Islam, but not by violence”

Like Lazuardi Birru, the BNPT has worked hard to communicate with its audiences using both off-line and on-line channels. Since its establishment, the agency has extensively used seminars and dialogues in their messaging. However, their efforts have been largely belated and less effective. BNPT began using on-line channels in 2014 to raise awareness of how terrorist groups heavily use on-line communication, particularly social media, to promote their radical perspectives.

In part, this came after Solehuddin, an expert working for BNPT, finally concluded that radical groups are increasingly finding the Internet to be an effective way to disseminate their radical ideology. While late in the game, BNPT has nonetheless expanded its outreach via such platforms as Twitter and Facebook. Among the newly established BNPT websites are [www.damailahindonesiaku.com](http://www.damailahindonesiaku.com) and [www.damai.org](http://www.damai.org). Since the inception of its Twitter page in February 2013, BNPT has increased its number of tweets to 5,532 through April 2015. This indicates that they are starting to evolve along with the trends.

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<sup>14</sup> Yudha Pratama Jaya, “Menekan Radikalisme dengan Komik “Ketika Nurani Bicara,” *Antaranews.com*, September 25, 2010, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.antarnews.com/berita/222068/menekan-radikalisme-dengan-komik-ketika-nurani-bicara>.

## Conclusion

In spite of this evolution, the BNPT has also demonstrated poor judgement in some of its outreach and counterterrorism programs. Among these is the controversial case of its shutting down of alleged radical websites in 2015. This action and the rumors that surrounded it caused great harm to the BNPT's broader agenda. Moreover, it indicated that the BNPT remains largely reactive to trends and lacks a coherent strategic communication policy that can foster sustainable engagement with and the trust of their target audiences.

Based on this conclusion, in order for the BNPT to communicate effectively in changing minds and behaviors of their target audiences, it is necessary for them to conduct an assessment of how their audiences perceive them and to what level the agency contributes to shaping their responses against radical ideology and its threat. Based on this study's results, they further need to identify key players among their target audiences and analyze key messages mostly relevant to each of them. Lastly, they need to balance their tendency of ensuring visibility in public with engaging local community-based organizations and giving them a sense of ownership of the programs to which they belong.

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