



Terrorism and Election Cycles in Indonesia: The Record So Far

By

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Introduction

What are the chances of terrorist attacks taking place during Indonesia's 2024 election cycles? And what are the chances those terrorist attacks compromise the legitimacy of election results? These questions become pertinent as the nation is heading into the polls on 14 February 2024. In Indonesia, the election cycle for the 2024 election has started on 13 November 2023 with political campaigns that will end on 10 February 2024. The election will be held on 14 February 2024 and the new president/vice president will be sworn in on 20 October 2024. Thus, the "right momentum" for terrorist groups to commit a disruptive action spans for nearly a year.

Terrorist attacks during election cycles are relevant to the discussion of Indonesia's terrorism and counter-terrorism because Indonesia has experienced riots, demonstrations, conflicts between groups, and acts of terrorism that were politically and ideologically motivated during the past election cycles.¹

Reviewing and Reflecting on the Literature

Literature of terrorism studies have provided three categories of explanations for the chances of terrorist attacks taking place on election cycles. First, election cycles maybe more prone to violence in immature democracies and less so in mature democracies.² Secondly, electoral violence can occur due to the affiliation of political parties that are contesting with violent groups or militant wings. There are political parties that emerge from violent groups and then maintain the existence of their military wings, some of which are still operating even as they already gain access to legitimate political channels. Research has found that political parties that have military factions may still conduct violence even after they win

an election.³ Third, managing the opposition’s participation in elections also determines the existence and intensity of electoral violence; the incumbent government controls the constitutionality that determines the extent to which opposition forces can participate in formal legal contestation, which further solidifies moderate political opportunities so that the path of extremism is no longer relevant.⁴

To sum up, the findings in previous research explain violence in the electoral cycle as a result of the form of government regime, the maturity of democracy, the level of prosperity of a democracy, the association between political parties and militant wings, and the policies of the incumbent government or the government of the majority party in regulating the participation of opposition groups in general elections. In essence, violence may still take place even in election cycles of mature democracies. One may look to the violence that took place in the wake of the results of the 2020 Presidential Election in the United States.

Looking Back To Previous Election Cycles: Terrorist Attacks as a Constant

Indonesia’s presidential and legislative elections that took place in 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019 were all marked by acts of terrorism. However, most terrorist attacks during these election cycles had taken place outside of Jakarta and other major cities. In order to show the extent to which terrorist organizations in Indonesia either concentrate on conducting attacks in major cities or in outer islands, the next figure shows the type of terrorist organizations conducting attacks during electoral cycles.

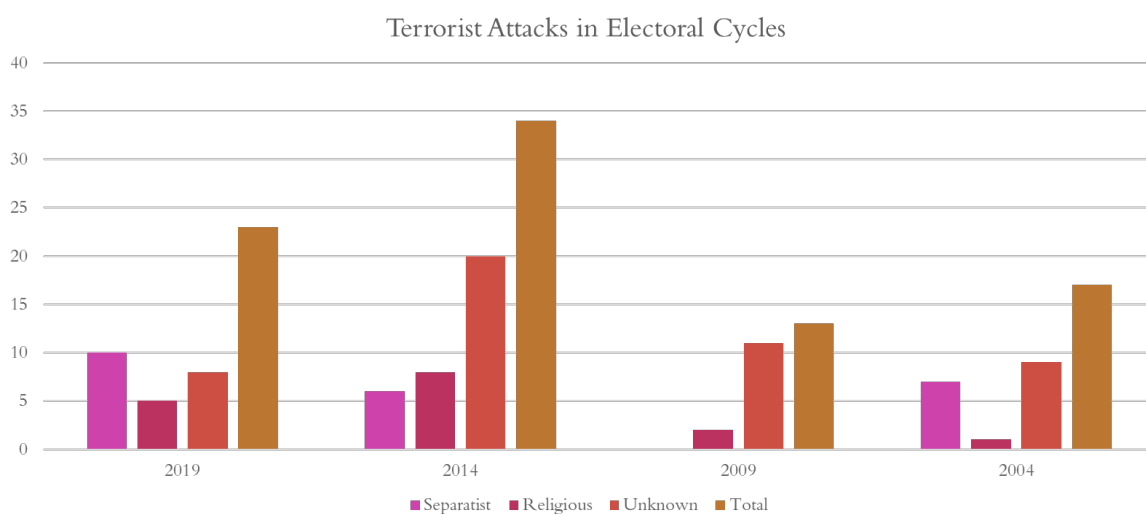


Figure 1. Distribution of terrorist attacks during electoral cycles based on group objectives.

Source: Author’s data recapitulation from Global Terrorism Database (<https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>)





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Figure 1 shows that most of the terrorist attacks taking place within the electoral cycle were separatist in character and therefore occurred outside of Jakarta and other major cities. Religious terrorism usually takes place in urban areas instead of peripheral areas. In Indonesia, separatist terrorists are located almost entirely in Papua and Aceh provinces. Religious acts of terrorism in Indonesia in areas outside Jakarta have mostly taken place in Central Sulawesi. In the 2019 electoral cycle, only two attacks took place in Jakarta, while most terrorist attacks (14 of them) took place in Papua province; other provinces that got hit by terrorist attacks in that year included Central Sulawesi (1 attack), South Sulawesi (1), East Java (1), Central Java (1), and Banten provinces (1). In 2014 electoral cycle, only one terrorist attack hit Jakarta, most of the others hit Papua province (9 attacks), Aceh (5 attacks), Central Java (3 attacks), and each of South Sulawesi, East Java, Yogyakarta, and Banten provinces got hit by 1 terrorist attack.

It is also noticeable from Figure 1 that terrorist attacks during electoral cycles took place more frequently during the last ten years (2014 & 2019) compared to the previous ten years (2004 & 2009), which indicates an increasing volume of terrorist attacks during election cycles.

However, it should be noted that the highest volumes of terrorist attacks have taken place outside of the election cycles, i.e. outside the political campaigns and events related to the election, including the swearing in of elected presidents and vice-presidents. Data of terrorist attacks extracted from the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database suggests that terrorist attacks in Indonesia's electoral cycles range between 3 to 5 attacks, which is relatively low compared to the number of terrorist attacks outside of the electoral cycles which could reach as high as 12 attacks in a single month.⁵ While terrorist attacks have indeed taken place during electoral cycles, the worst and most memorable attacks have taken place outside of electoral cycles. Those attacks that have taken place within the electoral cycles have been low-impact and mostly taken place outside the capital city or even outside of the Java Island, and therefore unable to compromise the legitimacy of elections.

It is very possible that the low-impact and peripheral characters of terrorist attacks within Indonesia's electoral cycles are due to a maximization of domestic security during the electoral cycles, the budget of which can be more than 2 trillion IDR for the employment of police forces alone.

Another explanation for this downslope of terrorist attacks during Indonesia's electoral cycles is that terrorist groups in Indonesia do not see presidential and legislative elections as the only political momentum that can be exploited; along with the increasing political participation of citizens in the reform era, political momentum can be spread evenly throughout the period of national leadership,





including regional elections, the creation of new policies or laws, and other momentum that can attract public political activism. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Indonesia in 2024 carries out three rounds of elections: presidential and legislative members elections, gubernatorial and mayoral elections, and a possible second-round of presidential election if the first one fails to produce conclusive results. Therefore, 2024 provides plenty of possible targets of electoral violence for armed groups operating in and outside of major cities.

Conclusion

Data on terrorist attacks in the previous election cycles suggest that the likelihood for terrorist attacks to take place during election cycle is constantly present, although such attacks might be taking place in Indonesia's territorial peripheries by separatist terrorists. Terrorist attacks are never absent in Indonesia's election cycles, but they have so far never conclusively compromised the legitimacy of election results. This conclusion is contingent on three aspects.

First, while the religious extremist terrorists generally perceive elections as in line with Western values instead of Islamic teachings, they may demonstrate anti-democratic attitudes by attacking elections. In this regard, Indonesia must pay attention to all possible connections between political leaders and parties, and violent non-state actors, including armed separatists, terrorist groups, and violent-extremist groups.

Secondly, terrorist attacks during election cycles may escalate and impact on election results as people's welfare worsens. In this regard, Indonesia, as a country with the experience of five free and fair elections since 1999, certainly has a smaller chance of electoral violence, but it is nonetheless not immune to impacts of high unemployment and inflation rates.

Finally, while there are no indications of restrictions on political oppositions to run for presidencies and other elected positions, indications of incumbent president's support to one of the running presidential candidates suggest a possibly of unfair competition in an otherwise free and fair election. The extent to which this indication of unfairness is contained as a discourse of political elites instead of adopted by militant groups remains to be seen.





Endnotes

- 1 As shown in the utilization of 40,000-strong *Kamra* (people's defense) by a presidential candidate in the run-up to 1999 election, see Romain Bertrand, "'Behave Like Enraged Lions': Civil Militias, the Army and the Criminalisation of Politics in Indonesia," *Global Crime* 6, no. 3–4 (2004): 325–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440570500274174>; Indonesia's counterterrorism has also been dictated by government's legitimacy in the past, see Kai He, "Indonesia's Foreign Policy after Soeharto: International Pressure, Democratization, and Policy Change," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8, no. 1 (2008): 47–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcm021>.
- 2 See for example Timothy D. Sisk, *Elections in Fragile States: Between Voice and Violence*, Paper Prepared for The International Studies Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California, March 24–28, 2008; Lindsay Shorr Newman, "Do Terrorist Attacks Increase Closer to Elections?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 1 (2013): 8–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.733247>.
- 3 Jared R. Dmello, Arie Perliger & Matthew Sweeney, "The Violence of Political Empowerment: Electoral Success and the Facilitation of Terrorism in the Republic of India," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 7 (2022): 1281–1304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1761342>.
- 4 Alex Braithwaite & Jessica Maves Braithwaite, "Restricting Opposition in Elections and Terrorist Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (2020): 1550–1572, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1495627>.
- 5 Such as in May 2018, as recorded in Global Terrorism Database, see the number of terrorist attacks during this period in https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=2017&end_yearonly=2020&start_year=&start_month=&start_day=&end_year=&end_month=&end_day=&asmSelect0=&country=93&asmSelect1=&dtp2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.





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