

# **EXPLAINING INDONESIA'S SILENCE ON THE UYGHUR ISSUE**

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## CONTENTS

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	The Exodus to Southeast Asia.....	1
III.	Uyghurs Join Southeast Asian Militants (2013-16) .....	3
	A. Uyghurs in Poso .....	4
	B. Uyghurs in Bangkok and Batam .....	5
	C. Uyghurs in Nong Khai.....	7
IV.	Politicisation of the Uyghur Issue 2017-18 .....	7
	A. The Opposition's Allegations .....	8
	B. Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and China's Pre-emptive Diplomacy.....	9
	C. Reactions to Visits by Diaspora Leaders .....	11
	D. Guided Tours to Xinjiang.....	12
V.	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Dilemma .....	13
VI.	Conclusion .....	14

## I. INTRODUCTION

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The systematic repression of China's ethnic Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang Autonomous Region has caused little angst in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country.

The Indonesian government by and large sees the Uyghur crackdown as a legitimate response to separatism, and it will no more interfere in China's 'domestic affairs' than it would accept Chinese suggestions for how it should deal with Papua. The fact that China is Indonesia's largest trading partner and second largest investor adds to its reluctance to speak out, but economic considerations are not the major factor here.

The country's largest Muslim organisations treat reports of widespread human rights violations with scepticism, choosing to dismiss them as American propaganda in the Sino-US power struggle. Their leaders have also accepted invitations to visit Xinjiang and most seem to take China's assurances of protecting religious freedom there at face value. The hundreds of Indonesian Muslims studying in China by and large have a positive experience, contributing to an unwillingness to acknowledge serious restrictions on religious practice.

Domestic politics are also a factor. The most vocal proponents of attention to Uyghur repression have been hardline Islamist activists aligned with defeated candidate Prabowo Subianto who challenged incumbent Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in Indonesia's presidential election on 17 April 2019. Their use of the Uyghur issue as a cudgel to attack Jokowi for being pro-China and anti-Muslim has only added to the unwillingness of moderates and Jokowi supporters to be drawn into the fray. To suddenly take a strong position in defence of the Uyghurs could be seen as capitulating to pressure from the religious right.

For the Foreign Ministry, the issues between Indonesia and China, from the South China Sea to the unfulfilled promises of the Belt and Road Initiative, are so many and varied that the treatment of Uyghurs barely registers.

In all of this, the issue of terrorism has been almost irrelevant. Few people in foreign policy-making circles have focused very much on the militant Uyghurs who ended up working with Indonesian ISIS supporters or who found their way to Thailand, Malaysia or the Philippines. The Chinese argument that the Uyghurs writ large are terrorists – as well as separatists and religious extremists – has gained little headway with the Indonesian public or political elite.

Indonesian officials have made it clear that they would welcome constructive policy suggestions that might help the Uyghurs without provoking China. It is hard to see points of intervention, however, when China is convinced that its "Strike Hard" campaign has prevented violence in Xinjiang, and when its charm offensive targeting Indonesian Muslims has been remarkably successful.

A comparison with the Rohingya issue is instructive. When violence in late 2017 by the military in Myanmar led to the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims, Indonesia could at least offer humanitarian aid to refugees inside Bangladesh. But similar opportunities for a non-confrontational approach do not exist with respect to Xinjiang. If Indonesia wants a place on the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2020, it may have to adopt a more forceful position – at the very least, lending its weight to calls for an independent investigation of detention, discrimination and restrictions on fundamental rights.

## II. THE EXODUS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The 2013-16 exodus of thousands of Uyghurs fleeing through Southeast Asia to seek a better life in Turkey for the most part went unnoticed in Indonesia. The destinations of choice were Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur where travellers for a fee could get fake passports, air tickets and

contacts. The underground network from China took them to Kunming, on the border with Myanmar, through Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos into Thailand and from there to Malaysia. There were thus no mass arrivals in or deportations from Indonesia playing out in the mass media that would have given the issue more attention.

The exodus was a direct result of the crackdown by Chinese authorities following 2009 communal riots in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang, in which 197 people were killed, according to official Chinese sources. Repression did not start with the riots, but it intensified dramatically afterwards. In the first days of the rioting, the victims were predominantly Han Chinese, but Chinese vigilante groups reportedly began targeting Uyghurs as the rioting escalated.<sup>1</sup>

Within two weeks of the riots, security forces had arrested some 4,000 Uyghurs; imposed new restrictions on travel, study and worship, not only in Urumqi but also in Kashgar and other cities; and stepped up monitoring of the general population with CCTV cameras in public areas. Chinese authorities suggested that the riots had been started by separatists in the Uyghur diaspora.

In Indonesia, the Urumqi riots and subsequent crackdown received wide media coverage and sparked a small demonstration on 13 July 2009 in front of the Chinese embassy in Jakarta. About 200 Islamist protestors called on China to stop the “massacre” of Uyghur Muslims and for Indonesia to cut diplomatic relations with China, with undercurrents of anti-Chinese and anti-communist rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia's ambassador to China, Sudrajat, (later a Gerindra candidate for governor of West Java and in 2014 and 2019 a spokesperson for the Prawowo campaign) reiterated Indonesia's position of non-interference in China's domestic affairs.

China blamed the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), the largest Uyghur diaspora organisation that at the time was led by U.S.-based Rebiya Kadeer, as the instigator of the riots, without any evidence.<sup>3</sup> The diaspora in fact consisted of many different groups with different agendas – secular nationalist, religious nationalist, pro-autonomy and pro-independence – but as China gradually realised that Southeast Asia was likely to respond more to a terrorist than a separatist threat, it increasingly focused its accusations on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), sometimes also referred to as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).<sup>4</sup>

Since 2001, Chinese authorities had accused ETIM of instigating terrorism and other forms of violence within China and abroad and of having links to al-Qaeda. In the post-9/11 atmosphere, the U.S. in 2002 designated ETIM as a terrorist organisation, yet many analysts doubted China's allegations that it was a coherent organisation with capacity to carry out sophisticated operations.<sup>5</sup>

The 2009 riots and their aftermath led to first a trickle, then a flood of Uyghurs leaving home with one goal: to build a new life in Turkey. One of the first signs of their determination to use Southeast Asia as a way station was the arrival of 20 Uyghurs in Cambodia in December

1 “Ethnic violence in China leaves 140 dead”, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), 6 July 2009. By 10 July 2009, the official death toll was 184 of whom 137 were Han, according to the official Xinhua News Agency. “Death toll from China's ethnic riots hits 184,” Associated Press, 10 July 2009.

2 The demonstration was organised by Forum Umat Islam (FUI), a coalition of conservative activists whose leader, Mohammad al-Khaththath, later played a prominent role in the 2016 campaign to bring down the Jakarta governor. See “Jika RI Tidak Protes Pembantaian Muslim China?” [www.voa.islam.com](http://www.voa.islam.com), 13 July 2009.

3 In 2014, WUC splintered as Seyit Tumoruk, the former vice president of WUC-Turkey, broke away to set up the Eastern Turkestan National Council in Kayseri, where the largest Uyghur enclave in Turkey is located. IPAC interview with the President of Uyghur American Association (UAA), Ilshat Hassan via telephone, 1 May 2019.

4 Scholars differ on whether these are two distinct organisations or whether TIP effectively replaced ETIM. China, however, generally refers only to ETIM. See Kathrin Hille, “Xinjiang Widens Crackdown on Uighurs,” *Financial Times*, 19 July 2009 and Sean Roberts, “Imaginary Terrorism? The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat,” *PONARS Eurasia*, March 2012.

5 Işık Kuşçu Bonnenfant, “Constructing the Uyghur Diaspora: Identity Politics and the Transnational Uyghur Community,” in Guljanat K. Ercilasun and Konuralp Ercilasun (Eds.) *The Uyghur Community Diaspora, Identity and Geopolitics*, New York, 2018 and Sean Roberts, *op.cit.*

2009, with seven more appearing in Laos in early 2010. Both groups were forcibly deported.<sup>6</sup> No one appears to have done a full accounting of how many came and left, but the number who successfully reached Kuala Lumpur and then were assisted to get to Turkey far exceeded the deportations. As one UNHCR official noted of Uyghurs transiting Malaysia for Turkey with the help of Turkish organisations, “It was our biggest resettlement success story – and we didn’t have to lift a finger.”<sup>7</sup>

### III. UYGHURS JOIN SOUTHEAST ASIAN MILITANTS (2013-16)

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Between 2013 and 2016, three developments came together: the escalation of Uyghur-led violence inside China and intensified crackdowns in response; increased departures of Uyghurs for Turkey through Southeast Asia; and the internationalisation of the conflict in Syria that attracted jihadi fighters from across the globe. These factors brought a new kind of Uyghur to Southeast Asia – men with militant links.

By 2013 in China, according to one scholar:

Uyghur-initiated acts of violence began looking increasingly like planned terrorist attacks by any definition of the term, appearing to be well-organized and targeting citizens by surprise in public places.<sup>8</sup>

The incidents included a 2013 vehicle attack on tourists in Tiananmen Square; a mass stabbing at Kunming train station in March 2014 that killed 33; and a bombing in Urumqi that killed 43.<sup>9</sup> The question was who was giving the commands and where the recruitment and training was taking place. More Uyghurs were showing up among the extremist Islamist militias in Syria, but their focus still seemed to be more on stopping persecution in Xinjiang or attacking China than on joining a global caliphate.

At least thirteen Uyghurs joined extremists in Indonesia between 2014 and 2016 but others with possible links to TIP or ISIS showed up in Thailand. Five with suspected but never proven radical links arrived in the southern Philippines in June 2014. They had crossed into Zamboanga from Sabah, Malaysia and according to Philippine authorities had visited Abu Sayyaf in Basilan and stayed with contacts from the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Cotabato. Philippine intelligence picked up their trail, and they were arrested in Manila on 21 June 2014. All claimed they were only trying to get to Turkey and had been persuaded by smugglers who sold them false Turkish passports that it was easier to leave from the Philippines than from Malaysia – an unlikely story, given their hosts.<sup>10</sup> On 14 July 2014, all were deported to Ankara, Turkey, the Philippine government taking the humane option of recognising their fake passports rather than sending them back to China to face certain arrest or worse.

It remains unclear to this day whether one organisation was responsible for all of the above; whether the nerve centre of the operations for sending Uyghurs to Indonesia was in Turkey or Syria; and whether, as some sources have suggested, ETIM or ISIS had a policy of diverting the “overflow” of Uyghurs wanting to go to Turkey to conflict areas of Southeast Asia where they could get experience that would help them with the struggle at home. The Uyghurs detained

6 Kendrick Kuo and Kyle Springer, “Illegal Uighur Immigration in Southeast Asia,” [www.cogitasia.com](http://www.cogitasia.com), 24 April 2014.

7 Personal communication with IPAC, 2014

8 Sean R. Roberts, “The biopolitics of China’s ‘war on terror’ and the exclusion of the Uyghurs.” *Critical Asian Studies*, 22 March 2018.

9 Ibid.

10 Confidential documents made available to IPAC in Manila in 2016. One, a summary of the case from the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission, is dated 4 July 2014; the other is a custodial debriefing also from June or July 2014 but the copy given IPAC is missing the exact date.

in Southeast Asia on suspicion of terrorist links became a political football as China exerted intense pressure to send them back. Muslim Southeast Asia generally held off because of domestic considerations and genuine sympathy among many officials for the Uyghur plight. Thailand after the 2015 Erawan shrine bombing was worried that further deportations could prompt another attack.

#### A. *Uyghurs in Poso*

On 14 September 2014, Indonesians were startled when counter-terrorism police arrested four Uyghurs en route to Poso to join the pro-ISIS “army” of Santoso, head of the self-styled “Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia” (Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, MIT). No one had any idea who they were or where they came from. They were first reported as Turkish because they were all carrying Turkish passports, three of which were fake but there was no record of them having departed Turkey and three of the four could not speak Turkish fluently.<sup>11</sup> A police interrogation report a few days later listed Turkestan as the country of origin, and one newspaper even reported them as being from “East Turkmenistan.”

Police initially had no idea what language they were speaking and efforts to interrogate them in Indonesian, Arabic and English all failed. Upon learning they were Uyghurs, Chinese authorities requested access to them. Indonesia's National Anti-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) agreed but asked the Chinese to provide a Uyghur-speaking official to help with their interrogation. China readily complied, to the Uyghurs' intense discomfort.<sup>12</sup>

Three of the Uyghurs had travelled from Xinjiang, and it remains unclear if they knew what they were getting into when they came to Indonesia. The fourth man, Ahmet Bozoglan, a Uyghur from Adana, Turkey, almost certainly did, as did a Uyghur fixer in Kuala Lumpur. An Indonesian ISIS member in Syria, Bagus Maskuron, now dead, had been in touch with Santoso in Poso about receiving and training the Uyghurs. He also must have been in touch with TIP in Syria, because they worked out a plan to divert Uyghurs fleeing Xinjiang to conflict areas in Southeast Asia. This way, local Islamist fighters could get extra manpower and the Uyghurs presumably would get combat skills. Maskuron told a fellow Indonesian that “thousands” would be sent to join Santoso.<sup>13</sup>

These four were not the first to try and join the jihad there. Several others had arrived in Sulawesi in late 2013 or early 2014 but these were the first to be caught. They had met in Malaysia, arriving by different routes:

- One, from Kashgar, said he faced systematic discrimination and that he was not allowed to worship or recite the Qur'an. His parents gave him money to try and get to Turkey and he left in July 2014 via Kunming and Laos, with contacts provided through the social media site Talkbox. In Laos he joined another group of Uyghurs and they rented a car to the Thai border and from there got a bus to Bangkok. A contact there told them where to cross the Thai border into Malaysia and they eventually reached Kuala Lumpur. He got a Turkish passport there for \$700.

11 The police had brought three Turkish interpreters but all four Uyghurs proved to be non-native speakers. “Pemeriksaan WNA Terduga Teroris Terkendala Bahasa,” *Investor Daily*, 15 September 2014.

12 China's defence attaché in Jakarta requested BNPT access to see the Uyghur detainees. BNPT, in return, asked China to send an officer who could speak Uyghur and assist the Indonesian police with their investigation. China was happy to do so. IPAC interview via phone with former BNPT official. 27 May 2019.

13 Transcript of conversation between Bagus Maskuron and Arif Budi Setyawan alias Arif Tuban in trial of Abdullah alias Altinci Bayyram et al, North Jakarta District Court, 2015.

- A second, also from Kashgar, described a hard life as a petty trader. He left in late June 2014, travelling via Cambodia with three friends. They found their way to Bangkok, where all purchased false passports for \$1,000 each.
- The third, from Aksu left in a group of five in June 2014 and reached Malaysia via Thailand. He paid \$2,000 for a Turkish passport in Kuala Lumpur.
- The Uyghur from Adana, Turkey said he had been in touch with the fixer in Malaysia since 2012 about helping Uyghurs get to Turkey. He said in July 2014, the fixer asked him to come to Kuala Lumpur to help with a few cases. A month after his arrival, the fixer, who had met the other three Uyghurs one by one, told them all they would be going to Indonesia.

The four then all got Indonesian visas, paid a boatman \$500 a head to take them across the Malacca Strait and landed illegally somewhere in Riau province, where the boatman, for another fee, took their passports and got them official entry stamps. After several days, they then flew to Jakarta, where they were met by an Indonesian guide. The three from Xinjiang claim now that they were duped, and they had been promised that Indonesia would just be a transit stop en route to Turkey, with a little tourism on the side. It soon became clear that this was no short stopover.

From Jakarta, they had another circuitous journey through West Java. In early September 2014, two of the Uyghurs left for Makassar, Sulawesi via Bali where one of Santoso's men was on hand to meet them. The fixer from Malaysia then showed up and took the other two shopping for camping gear. They then flew to Makassar via Surabaya where they joined their friends. They were all arrested en route to Poso on 13 September 2014.

China claimed, without producing evidence, that the four were fugitives involved in the Kunming railway station attack, part of a group of nine that had fled to Indonesia and Malaysia, and therefore Indonesia was obliged to return them as per an extradition agreement signed by both countries in 2009.<sup>14</sup> On 10 February 2015, Indonesia and China agreed to enhance cooperation in exchanging information on terrorism suspects in an agreement signed in Beijing by then BNPT head Saut Usman and Deputy Public Security Minister Meng Hongwei.<sup>15</sup>

In July 2015, the four Uyghurs were sentenced to six years in prison. They are due for release in 2020 and the question then is whether they will be returned to China or Turkey.

### *B. Uyghurs in Bangkok and Batam*

On 17 August 2015, a bombing in the Erawan shrine in Bangkok killed 20 and injured 125. The shrine is popular with Chinese visitors, and more Chinese were among the casualties than any other nationality except for Thais. On 29 August, police arrested a Uyghur named Adem Karadag alias Bilal Mohammed in an apartment where they also found explosives and hundreds of other passports; Adem himself had a fake Turkish passport. A few days later they arrested a second Uyghur, Yusufu Mieraili, near the Cambodian border. Details about the perpetrators remain very sketchy and their trial, which began in November 2016, was ongoing – or more accurately, stalled – at the time of this report. Thai police sources said at the time that the bombing appeared to be in retaliation for Thailand's deportation of 109 Uyghurs a month earlier and that the bombers had originally been planning to attack a Cambodian target. There is no evidence of any link between the men in Thailand and the men arrested in Indonesia.

<sup>14</sup> "RI, China hunting down Xinjiang terrorism suspects in Poso", *Jakarta Post*, 10 February 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

In October 2015, two more Uyghurs showed up in Indonesia. Nur Memet Abdullah alias Ali and Halide Tuerxin alias Muhammad arrived on Batam island from Malaysia. This time the ISIS contact in Syria was Bahrin Naim, a Javanese who had moved from Solo to the ISIS “capital” of Raqqa, Syria in January 2015. Of the two, Halide was by far the more senior and may have had a position in ETIM/TIP. Nur changed his story so many times that it is difficult to know for sure, but it is possible that he was duped.

In testimony to police, he said he had been a bread-seller in Hoten, Xinjiang and left to get a better life in Turkey. He flew with a friend from Urumqi to Guangxi, China and from there into Vietnam by car. In Hanoi, he got a fake Kyrgyz passport in name of Azimow Dunar. The two friends then travelled to Ho Chi Minh city where they got tickets to Istanbul on two different flights. Nur left a few days after his friend, arriving on 16 September 2015, only to be arrested on arrival and deported back to Vietnam because of the Kyrgyz passport.<sup>16</sup> In Vietnam, police got him an onward ticket to Kuala Lumpur and Kyrgyzstan, he said, but he got off the plane in Malaysia and found a place to stay in Kuala Lumpur. About ten days later he met Halide.

Halide told him that there was extra police scrutiny of Uyghurs in the aftermath of the Erawan Shrine bombing, so it was better to go to Indonesia. They joined a boatload of undocumented Indonesian migrants returning home and eventually landed in Batam, where they were met by the man who a year later would blow himself up at the Solo police station. This was Nur Rohman, an Indonesian born and bred in Solo, who was also a contact of Bahrin Naim's. Within 24 hours, he had obtained a false Indonesian identity card (KTP) for Nur, the Uyghur. Halide said he was going back to Malaysia, and the two “Nurs” flew to Jakarta where they joined a group of would-be bombers in Bekasi. Nur, the Uyghur, who was known to his Indonesian friends as Ali, was under constant pressure to agree to be a suicide bomber. In the end, he said, he agreed, “because it was better to die in Indonesia than in China.” He, the others in the Bekasi house and the men who constituted the Batam cell were all arrested in December 2015.

China continued to demand that the Uyghurs be sent back, with Indonesian officials very publicly resisting the pressure. Then China got a bargaining chip. In April 2016, Chinese police arrested a fugitive financier, Samadikun Hartono, wanted by Indonesia for bank fraud since the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98. He had been living in Shanghai. Chinese pressure intensified, along the lines of “We’ll give you the banker if you give us the Uyghurs”. Several high-level officials, led by Luhut Panjaitan, insisted that Indonesia would not barter with human beings and Uyghurs arrested for crimes in Indonesia would serve their sentences there.<sup>17</sup> Several officials argued that they should not be sent back because they would face certain execution – a welcome if somewhat ironic argument given Indonesia's continued use of the death penalty. In the end, the fugitive banker came back on 21 April, and the Uyghurs stayed in prison.

A few weeks later, however, Halide Tuerxin resurfaced. Indonesian police caught him in May in Batam and before the news media even knew he was in custody, he was quietly turned over to China. He remains the only Uyghur to be deported and it may be because Indonesia wanted to thank China for the return of the banker or because Halide was high-ranking enough to be a more serious threat.

The remaining Uyghurs in Poso were all killed in 2016 during the joint police-military action known as Operation Tinombala, aimed at capturing Santoso. Sadik Yorulmas alias Abdul Azis; Ismail Turan alias Abu Basir, also known as Joko Uighur; Bahtusan Malagasi alias Farouk; and Nuretin Gundogdu alias Abdul were all killed in March 2016.<sup>18</sup> Mustafa Genc alias Musab was

16 Something rings a little odd in this part of Nur's testimony, because it was unusual for Turkish authorities to deport Uyghur with fake passports, unless they suspected something else was amiss.

17 “Indonesia Takkan Deportasi Uighur ke Cina,” [www.batamtoday.com](http://www.batamtoday.com), 23 April 2016.

18 “Ini Penampakan 4 WN Uighur Kelompok Teroris Santoso Yang Ditembak Mati,” [www.news.detik.com](http://www.news.detik.com), 30 March 2016. This posting has photographs of all the Uyghurs killed.

killed a few weeks later in April. Santoso himself was killed in July. On 7 August, a Uyghur named Ibrahim was shot and killed. Press reports at the time said that Ibrahim had been in Poso since 2013-14.

### *C. Uyghurs in Nong Khai*

The last chapter of regional links involving the Uyghurs and Southeast Asian extremists is the most complicated, because it links Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Syria. The story emerged from the arrest of Suryadi Ma'soed, an Indonesian from the pro-ISIS group *Jamaah Ansharud Daulah* (JAD). Beginning in late 2015, Suryadi made four trips to Mindanao with his second wife Neneng, first to buy arms for JAD and second, to arrange for Indonesian training. On the third trip, in March-April 2016, he and his wife went to Basilan to meet Isnilon Hapilon, the local Abu Sayyaf leader and amir of the ISIS coalition in the Philippines. On the fourth trip in June 2016, he accompanied the first group of Indonesian trainees to Basilan and also met Dr. Mahmud, a Malaysian national who had lived on Basilan since April 2014 and who had become the ISIS coalition's strategist, recruiter and financier.

Suryadi's travel and the weapons purchases were financed in part through an Indonesian known as Abu Asbal, an ISIS member who ran a safehouse in Istanbul for Indonesians waiting to cross into Syria.

In September 2016, Suryadi got an urgent message over the Telegram messaging app from Abu Asbal in Turkey asking him to go to Thailand and help a Uyghur known as Handzolah who had just escaped with other Uyghur prisoners from the Nong Khai immigration detention center in northeast Thailand. The escape took place on 20 September. Handzolah had apparently contacted a Uyghur in Turkey called Abu Alif, and it was Abu Alif who asked Abu Asbal to find someone who could help. Suryadi left for Thailand immediately (this time with his first wife), with Abu Asbal again arranging travel funds for the trip. Suryadi's mission was to help Handzolah get to Malaysia, and from there he would go to Turkey. Suryadi had no contacts in Thailand, however, so he asked Dr Mahmud on Basilan for help. Dr. Mahmud sent him a Telegram message with the name of a religious teacher from Pattani who could help with the crossing into Malaysia.

Suryadi got to Nong Khai, where Abu Alif, the Turkey-based Uyghur, said that Handzolah was hiding out by a particular school. Suryadi looked all over but could not find him and after about a week returned home. Then Abu Alif contacted him again on 30 September, having found Handzolah, and asked Suryadi to go back. This time Suryadi found Handzolah and took him back to his hotel. Two days later, while they were still there, police and immigration officers surrounded the hotel. Handzolah ran, Suryadi and his wife checked out, and shortly afterwards, Handzolah was re-arrested. Abu Alif through Abu Asbal met all the expenses of the failed mission.

The whole episode suggests that Abu Alif may have had a hand in arranging some of the other Uyghur activities in Southeast Asia; it would be interesting to know if he had any connection with either Ahmet Bozoglan, the Uyghur from Adana, or with the Uyghur fixer in Malaysia.

## **IV. POLITICISATION OF THE UYGHUR ISSUE 2017-18**

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In September 2018, two leading human rights organisations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, issued detailed reports on China's internment, re-education and surveillance of ethnic Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. Based on interviews with relatives of detainees, former detainees, and Xinjiang residents, the reports outlined the elements of China's so-called

“Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism” that began in May 2014 and four years later had produced systematic human rights violations “of a scope and scale not seen in China since the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to those arrested for suspected terrorism offenses, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs had been forced to undergo political re-education in places that the government described as “vocational training centres”. Throughout the rest of Xinjiang, but particularly in urban centres, the government installed a surveillance system using sophisticated biometric technology that amounted to round-the-clock monitoring of the entire Muslim population, in violation of “internationally guaranteed rights to privacy, to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and to freedom of association and movement.”<sup>20</sup>

As international media attention to these practices reached a peak in late 2018, governments of Muslim countries, with the exception of Turkey, stayed largely silent.<sup>21</sup> Vice-President Kalla said that while Indonesia rejected repression and human rights violations of Uyghurs, it could not interfere in the domestic affairs of China.<sup>22</sup> The Uyghur issue also became politicised as the campaign for the April 2019 presidential election heated up, with ultra-nationalist and Islamist backers of candidate Prabowo Subianto portraying incumbent Jokowi as overly dependent on China because of alleged Chinese and Communist family ties – allegations which were patently untrue.<sup>23</sup> His government’s unwillingness to speak out about the Uyghurs was for them one more indication of his bias.

#### A. *The Opposition’s Allegations*

The allegations of Prabowo backers were part of a broader anti-Chinese undercurrent in the Islamist opposition. They fused several elements, including Jokowi’s alleged ethnic background; the opposition’s dislike of his reliance on Chinese companies, loans and workers for his signature infrastructure projects, and its conviction that the flood of Chinese workers would lead to the revival of Communism.<sup>24</sup>

There was also the conviction that “income inequality” had increased under Jokowi because of his alleged favouring of local Chinese over Muslim entrepreneurs, especially while his former deputy, Ahok, was Jakarta governor.<sup>25</sup> Local Muslim (pribumi) business owners feared that foreign investment from mainland China would lead to a growing influx of Chinese migrant workers, unfair competition from cheap Chinese imports and a widening trade deficit with China.<sup>26</sup> One of the false social media messages that went viral in late 2016 was the “news” that the number of Chinese migrant workers in Indonesia would reach ten million by 2017.<sup>27</sup> While

19 Human Rights Watch, “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” 9 September 2018,

20 Human Rights Watch, “Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App,” 1 May 2019; “How China Turned a City into a Prison, nytimes.com, 4 April 2019; “One Month, 500,000 Face Scans: How China is Using A.I. to Profile a Minority”, nytimes.com, 19 April 2019.

21 On 9 February 2019, Turkish President, Erdogan called the internment camps and systematic assimilation of “Uighur Turks” as a great shame for humanity. His statement was triggered by the death in detention of Uyghur folk musician Abdurehim Heyit.

22 “Soal Muslim Uighur, JK: Indonesia tak bisa ikut campur,” *Republika*, 18 December 2018.

23 From the time he was mayor of Solo in central Java from 2005-2010 and 2010-2012 Jokowi was dogged by false allegations that he was ethnic Chinese or that his parents had been affiliated to the outlawed Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI). When he ran for Jakarta governor in 2012 with an ethnic Chinese-Christian politician, Basuki Tjahja Purnama, better known as Ahok, as his deputy, Islamist opponents accused him of being an agent of Christian proselytization as well.

24 Many in the security forces and Islamic groups remain convinced that the “latent threat of Communism” remains a major security concern for Indonesia, despite the fact that the political left was annihilated in late 1965-66 and has never regained a mass following.

25 See IPAC, “After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia,” Report No.24, 6 April 2018, p.23.

26 Dewi Anwar, “Indonesia-China Relations: Coming Full Circle?”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, pp.146-161, in Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook, eds, 2019.

27 “Polisi Buru Pengunggah Pertama ‘Hoax’ 10 Juta Pekerja Cina”, www.tirto.id, 26 December 2016.

that information was clearly untrue (the real figure was closer to 32,000) the Jokowi government in March 2018 did adopt a regulation easing restrictions on the use of foreign workers that became a target of the Prabowo camp because it was seen as facilitating the entry of Chinese.<sup>28</sup>

In December 2018, anti-Jokowi Islamists active in the so-called 212 Movement planned a demonstration at the Chinese embassy to show solidarity with oppressed Uyghurs and criticise the government at the same time. Perhaps in an effort to head it off, on 17 December, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi summoned Chinese ambassador Xiao Qian to a meeting to convey concerns about the reports of human rights violations against Uyghurs. The ambassador assured the minister that China respected human rights and was only concerned about terrorism and extremism. In a statement issued on 20 December, the embassy noted:

Some Xinjiang residents had struggled to find jobs because of their poor command of the nation's official language and lack of skills. This has made them vulnerable to the instigation and coercion of terrorism and extremism. In light of the situation, Xinjiang has established professional vocational training institutions as the platform, providing courses on China's common language, legal knowledge, vocational skills, along with deradicalization education for citizens influenced by extremist ideas.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, demonstrations, called Action to Defend the Uyghurs (Aksi Bela Uighur) went ahead on 20 December in Jakarta, Bandung, Sukabumi (West Java), Bandar Lampung, Mataram (Lombok) and other cities but there was little sustained attention thereafter.

### B. *Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and China's Pre-emptive Diplomacy*

Chinese diplomats in Jakarta made an extra effort to try to ensure that Indonesia's two largest Islamic organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, remained silent, or at least refrained from joining street protests. There was little chance NU, firmly in the pro-Jokowi camp, would say anything that could be construed as support for groups that they saw as political and ideological rivals.<sup>30</sup>

Muhammadiyah was much more divided, with many supporting Prabowo and some Muhammadiyah groups actively involved in the December demonstrations.<sup>31</sup> Muhammadiyah leaders had closely followed reports of human rights violations against the Uyghurs and issued a carefully worded statement on 19 December, the day before the demonstrations. It said:

1. If the violence reported by the media and international human rights organisations is true, then the Chinese government has engaged in behaviour that violates universal human rights guaranteed by the United Nations. Whatever its reasons, we cannot approve China's use of violence against a weak and innocent people who should be protected. The Chinese government should be undertaking a more subtle policy aimed at increasing the prosperity of those it considers engaged in separatism.
2. We appeal to the Chinese government to be open in giving a truthful explanation about the conditions of the Uyghurs and cooperate with international bodies to overcome problems about inhumane treatment. Factual explanations will reduce reliance on opinions and questionable reports.

28 "Naik 10,88 Persen, Pekerja Asing Selama 2018 Didominasi dari China", *www.kompas.com*, 14 January 2019.

29 "Indonesian Muslims stage rally in support of Uighurs," *Jakarta Post*, 22 December 2018.

30 NU is a Sunni traditionalist organisation that rejects the ultra-puritan strain of Islam known as Salafism and tends to brand many hardline groups as "Wahabi", used as a pejorative term for the kind of Salafism practiced in Saudi Arabia.

31 "Ramai-Ramai Bela Muslim Uighur," *www.republika.co.id*, 21 December 2018.

3. We urge the UN and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to convene an emergency meeting to discuss the Uyghur issue and take steps that are in keeping with international norms. These bodies have a responsibility to build peace and prevent all forms of violence around the world.
4. The government of Indonesia should take diplomatic steps in keeping with its principle of a free and active foreign policy to create world peace and uphold principles of human rights, humanitarianism and justice.
5. The Indonesian ambassador to China needs urgently to give an explanation about the true state of things to the people of Indonesia and particularly to mass Islamic organisations. The silence on the part of the Chinese government is a matter of concern and could hurt diplomatic relations with China which have been fostered closely over the years.
6. Muhammadiyah stands ready to offer humanitarian and material aid for peace in Xinjiang, particularly for the Uyghurs.
7. We appeal to Indonesians, especially the Muslim community, to stand in solidarity with the Uyghurs and to uphold the principles of politeness, peace and harmony among all elements of the Indonesian population.<sup>32</sup>

The leadership of both Muhammadiyah and NU had advised their members to be cautious.<sup>33</sup> Just three days after the 20 December protest, Ambassador Xiao Qian visited NU headquarters to claim that China was being scapegoated by unnamed countries about its treatment of the Uyghurs, and in fact they were being sent to re-education and vocational camps only to increase their Chinese language and work skills. Then on 28 December, he went to Muhammadiyah headquarters and suggested that China was a far better friend to the Muslim world than the West:

For decades China has supported the Palestinian struggle in the United Nation Security Council. It has never attacked, invaded or occupied Muslim countries.<sup>34</sup>

NU leaders seemed convinced on all counts. NU Chairman Said Aqil Siraj remarked that NU could only provide counsel on the Uyghur issue, not condemnation, because it concerned China's internal affairs. "Just like us," he said, "we don't want other countries to interfere with insurgencies in Aceh or Papua."<sup>35</sup> He offered NU's services as the mediator between Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the Chinese government by highlighting its track record as "international peacemaker" in southern Thailand, Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. (NU's efforts had no visible impact on any of the above.) He also made a point of inviting the Chinese ambassador to break the Ramadhan fast at his pesantren on 8 May 2019. At the time he noted that China and Indonesia "could never be divided because they shared the same perspective on the history of Islam."<sup>36</sup>

Muhammadiyah's leaders were less willing to be taken in and said there was obvious discrimination against the Uyghurs. During Ambassador Xiao Qian's visit, Muhammadiyah

32 "Pernyataan Sikap PP Muhammadiyah tentang kekerasan di Uighur, Nomor 526/PER/1.0/I/2018," *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 19 December 2018.

33 In response to the Uyghur detention camps allegation, both organisations have made uncontroversial statements that essentially requested PRC to be transparent and clarify the situation, and make XUAR accessible to international fact-finding teams.

34 "Kunjungi Muhammadiyah, Dubes China: Kami Bersahabat dengan Dunia Islam," [www.sindonews.com](http://www.sindonews.com), 29 December 2018.

35 "NU has long track-record as peace maker between two conflicting parties. Started from Thailand government-Pattani conflict, Sunni-Syiah in Iraq and Afghanistan government with Taliban," says Said Aqil Siraj. See "Bertemu Dubes Cina, NU Nyatakan Siap Jadi Mediator," [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 24 December 2018.

36 "Ketum PBNU Said Aqil Buka Puasa Bersama Dubes Cina," [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 9 May 2019.

chairman Haedar Nasir requested that China grant international visitors' full access to Xinjiang province and that China resolve the conflict comprehensively through peaceful means.<sup>37</sup>

### C. *Reactions to Visits by Diaspora Leaders*

A visit to Indonesia in January 2019 of Seyit Tümtürk, president of East Turkestan National Council based in Istanbul, and Gulbakhar Cililova, a Uyghur from Kazakhstan, became tinged by Islamist fervour and anti-Jokowi rhetoric.<sup>38</sup> Their visit was initiated by the IHH International Humanitarian Foundation, a conservative Turkish NGO close to the Erdogan government, though they were officially invited by three Islamist organisations that had taken a prominent role in the 212 Movement: Bachtiar Nasir's Arrahman Quranic Learning Centre (AQL); the PKS-affiliated Fast Action Response (Aksi Cepat Tanggap, ACT) and United Islam Journalists (Jurnalis Islam Bersatu, JITU). They were asked to speak about the evidence that millions of Uyghurs were being detained, in discussions attended by several radical clerics and conservative politicians.<sup>39</sup>

Tümtürk's visit alarmed Chinese diplomats in Jakarta. On 14 January, Ambassador Xiao Qian made a sudden visit to Fahri Hamzah, a deputy spokesman in the DPR (formerly representing PKS faction until he was dismissed by the party in 2016), a few hours before he was scheduled to meet with the two visiting Uyghurs. Fahri was adamant that repression against Uyghurs was a human rights issue and thus the Indonesian government should not be afraid to speak out.<sup>40</sup>

Less than a week later, three Uyghur delegations representing the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) arrived in Indonesia. WUC is the largest Uyghur diaspora organisation with regional branches in the U.S., Western Europe and Asia. INFID, a Jakarta-based NGO, arranged meetings between the delegation and the Ministry for Religious Affairs, NU and Muhammadiyah. Many Indonesians they met displayed mistrust towards the WUC delegation, believing the timing of the visit was not because repression had increased but because the U.S. agency which funded the visit had an interest in creating ill-will toward China.<sup>41</sup> One NU ulama said, "If the Uyghurs have been oppressed for so long, then why are you only visiting now?"<sup>42</sup> One of the delegates, Ilshat Hassan, from the American Uyghur Association, said a Muhammadiyah official had asked him directly whether their motive in coming to Indonesia was to spark hostility between Indonesia and China. The official expressed some scepticism about the WUC's accounts of massive human rights violations and said that he wanted to see more evidence first.<sup>43</sup>

The mainstream media in Jakarta largely ignored the WUC's visit. The Islamist media, however, picked up a rumour that Jokowi had rejected its request for an audience and used it as yet another indication of Jokowi's pro-China stance.<sup>44</sup>

37 See "Dubes China Bertemu Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah Bahas Uighur," [www.kumparan.com](http://www.kumparan.com), 28 December 2018.

38 ETNC is a splinter group of the World Uyghur Congress, consisting mostly of Uyghurs living in Kayseri, Turkey. It takes a more radical position than the WUC in advocating for full independence of East Turkistan.

39 Among those present were Abu Jibril of Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI); his son, Muhammad Jibril Abdurrahman, founder of the Islamist but anti-ISIS website [arrahmah.com](http://arrahmah.com); and Hizbut Tahrir chairman Rokhmat Labib. Also present was a Prabowo campaign manager from the PKS party, Al Muzzamil Yusuf.

40 "Pertemuan Diaspora Uighur dengan Fahri Hamzah," [www.kiblat.net](http://www.kiblat.net), 15 January 2019.

41 Two of the three delegates, Omer Khanat (Uyghur Human Rights Project) and Ilshat Hassan (UAA) lived in Washington DC. The third delegate, Turghunjan Alawudi (WUC) is from Berlin. Their visit was funded by US-based non-profit foundation The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) established by US Congress. IPAC interview with staff of INFID, Jakarta, 11 March 2019.

42 IPAC interview with Ilshat Hasan via telephone, 1 May 2019.

43 Ibid.

44 "Ungkap Delegasi Uighur Ditolak Jokowi, Salim Said: Indonesia Merdeka apa Dijajah China?" [www.eramuslim.com](http://www.eramuslim.com), 3 April 2019.

#### D. Guided Tours to Xinjiang

China reinforced its charm offensive by offering guided tours of Xinjiang where senior Indonesians, especially from NU and Muhammadiyah, could see for themselves that religious freedom was fully protected and that Muslims were free to pray and study.<sup>45</sup>

Both organisations had developed warm relations with China. NU had signed several agreements with the Chinese government on assisting education, health and poverty eradication, and Chinese diplomats regularly visited NU institutions, particularly during the month of Ramadhan.<sup>46</sup> In Ramadhan 2015, the Chinese embassy in Jakarta donated Rp.100 million (\$7,000) for NU orphanages. In March 2017, NU signed an MoU with the ASEAN Nanyang Foundation and the Chinese embassy to establish the Center for Chinese Cultural Studies at NU University (Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia, UNUSIA) in Jakarta. In 2018, the embassy funded the installation of sanitation facilities in several NU-dominated villages in Cirebon, Indramayu and Karawang; at the same time, the ambassador announced 13 new scholarships for UNUSIA students to study in China. On 20 August 2017, NU formally established a special branch office in China that as of June 2019 had 246 Indonesian students. In February 2019, NU announced a new China-funded scholarship program (CGS) for undergraduate and graduate students who wanted to continue their study in Chinese universities.<sup>47</sup> As of mid-2019, Muhammadiyah was working on a similar agreement that would increase cooperation between Muhammadiyah universities and hospitals with counterparts in China.<sup>48</sup> Students in these programs generally were willing to attest that there was no Islamophobia in China and that the Hui Muslims they encountered were free to worship without interference.<sup>49</sup> Their largely positive experience, as filtered back to the leadership, reinforced the impression that the Xinjiang issue was primarily about secession, not religion, and Western allegations of human rights violations should therefore be treated with some scepticism.

In February 2019, to counter the allegation that Xinjiang was off-limits to foreign observers, China arranged guided tours for Indonesian Muslim leaders and reporters to see first-hand the condition of Uyghurs living in the “vocational training centers”.<sup>50</sup> The first trip included clerics from NU, Muhammadiyah and Indonesia Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI). None of the prominent Islamists involved in the Uyghur solidarity rallies were invited. Bayu Hermawan, a reporter from *Republika* newspaper on the trip described the “vocational camp” as indistinguishable from prison. In his interview with one of the “students”, he found that any Uyghur who had been labelled as radical by Chinese authorities had two options: incarceration or “re-education” in the camps.<sup>51</sup> One could be branded “radical”, he reported, for anything from refusing to eat pork and alcohol to watching religious sermon on smart phones.

NU delegates apparently took their host's claims at face value. Once back in Jakarta, the head of NU delegation, Robikin Emha, announced during a press conference that there were no concentration or internment camps and endorsed the policy of countering radicalisation through vocational training. In the same vein, Muhammadiyah secretary Agung Danarto complimented camp facilities:

45 On 12 September 2018, a Muhammadiyah delegation led by Haedah Nashir arrived in Beijing for a week's visit at the invitation of China's Ministry for Religious Affairs. NU made a similar visit to China in April 2016. See “Bertemu Ketua Muhammadiyah, ketua Asosiasi Islam Tiongkok: Warga Muslim Tiongkok dalam Kondisi Baik,” [www.suaramuhammadiyah.id](http://www.suaramuhammadiyah.id), 15 September 2018.; “Ini Rangkaian Agenda Lawatan PBNU ke Tiongkok,” [www.nu.or.id](http://www.nu.or.id), 20 April 2016.

46 See “Dubes Tiongkok Serahkan Santunan Rp 100 Juta ke PBNU,” [www.detik.com](http://www.detik.com), 6 July 2016; “Kedubes China-PBNU Kerjasama Bangun Sarana Air Bersih,” [www.nu.or.id](http://www.nu.or.id), 23 May 2018.

47 “LPTNU Membuka Program Beasiswa s2 dan s3 ke China,” [www.nu.or.id](http://www.nu.or.id), 8 March 2019.

48 “Kunjungi PP Muhammaadiyah, Dubes China Bahas kerjasama dalam Bidang Pendidikan Hingga Kesehatan,” [www.muhammadiyah.or.id](http://www.muhammadiyah.or.id), 5 July 2018.

49 Delegasi Muhammadiyah Kunjungi Muslim Uighur di Xinjiang,” [www.suaramuhammadiyah.com](http://www.suaramuhammadiyah.com), 6 March 2019.

50 China has invited three groups of foreign diplomats to visit Xinjiang since December 2018.

51 “Laporan dari Xinjiang: Antara Penjara atau ‘Kamp Vokasi,’” *Republika*, 25 February 2019.

The camps are great, there [the students] are given life-skills training, and so forth. They get lessons in agriculture, restaurant operation, cooking and automotive repair.<sup>52</sup>

A more critical note came from MUI's International Relations chairman, Muhyiddin Junaidi from Muhammadiyah. He said MUI was worried that what was happening in Xinjiang was not deradicalization, but “de-Islamisation.” Again, however, he said that MUI would not interfere with how China handled its radicalism and separatism problems, although he urged close monitoring of its practices.<sup>53</sup>

All of this added up to very little serious pressure on Indonesia from powerful domestic Muslim organisations.

## V. THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIR'S DILEMMA

The Indonesia government response remained muted as the Foreign Ministry and Office of the President struggled to decide whether China's policies in Xinjiang should be considered persecution against Muslims as a whole or as a legitimate, if heavy-handed response to insurgency and violent extremism – or a policy with elements of both. The polarisation of Muslim groups during the election campaign militated against any bold policy, but there was enough concern over reports of mass detention to prompt the ministry to invite any creative ideas that might help the Uyghurs without seriously offending China or contributing to campaign politics at home.

Staff at the Office of the President, not surprisingly, were more attuned to the campaign:

In fact, it was just [domestic] politics. We did not want to engage in their [the Uyghur persecution] narrative because it would only empower the Islamist and radicals belonging to the opposition. Our diplomatic problems with China are not because of this. It's because of China's encroachment in South China Sea and destabilization of Southeast Asia regional security – not the Uyghurs.<sup>54</sup>

Indonesia's stance toward the Uyghurs differs sharply from its reaction to the Rohingyas for several reasons. Violence against the Rohingya played out on international and local television; no one could doubt the images of destruction and suffering. The violence took place in Indonesia's backyard, with Myanmar a fellow ASEAN country – but one that was smaller and regionally less influential than Indonesia. There were concrete ways to help, which there were not with the Uyghurs. Even if Indonesia had limited options within Myanmar, it could offer concrete humanitarian assistance to the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh, at least until the Bangladeshi government made it increasingly difficult for Indonesian aid workers to get visas.<sup>55</sup> The large Muslim organisations like NU and Muhammadiyah not only supported the humanitarian aid program but worked together in a single coalition under the auspices of the Indonesian Foreign Ministry to deliver it. The aid program brought Indonesians into regular contact with those who had borne the brunt of the anti-Rohingya attacks, whereas on the highly controlled visits to Xinjiang, Chinese hosts ensured that the visitors would never hear from anyone upset about religious restrictions, constant monitoring or detention.

Whether Indonesia can maintain a largely hands-off stance remains to be seen. As it aims for

52 “Delegasi Muhammadiyah Kunjungi Muslim Uighur di Xinjiang,” [www.suaramuhammadiyah.com](http://www.suaramuhammadiyah.com), 6 March 2019.

53 “Tuhan tak Diizinkan Disembah di Kamp Vokasi Xinjiang,” [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), 1 March 2019.

54 IPAC interview with Prof Munajat, staff expertise for the Deputy V of the Office of the President (KSP), Jakarta, 14 May 2019.

55 See IPAC, “Indonesia and the Rohingya Crisis,” Report No. 46, 29 June 2018. In May 2019 Indonesia took a major step backwards by signing on to a “Preliminary Needs Assessment for Repatriation in Rakhine State” that envisions repatriation of refugees in Bangladesh without effective human rights guarantees.

a seat on the UN Human Rights Council for the term 2020-2022, it may be under pressure to address the situation in Xinjiang more directly.

## VI. CONCLUSION

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Despite the common perception among many Western analysts and activists that the failure of Muslim countries to speak out against abuses in Xinjiang is because of economic dependence on China or fear of offending a major trading partner, the truth with respect to Indonesia is much more complicated.

For the foreign ministry, reluctance to speak out is partly because there are perceived to be more important issues at stake with China, such as the South China Sea and partly because it is seen more as a domestic separatist question than a human right concern. There is also great wariness in the ministry and in other parts of government of getting involved in an issue that has become so politicised at home, with anti-Jokowi forces using Indonesia's silence on Uyghurs as yet another way to try and paint Jokowi as a pro-China lackey. To take a more vocal stance would be seen in some quarters as capitulating to the Islamist right.

There is also deep scepticism about any reports coming out of Western human rights organisations or out of Uyghur diaspora organisations based in the U.S. or Germany – but even the Istanbul-based East Turkestan National Council delegates did not exactly get a warm reception. Many of the reports are seen as thinly disguised propaganda efforts designed to denigrate China as the US-China global power struggle intensifies. The experience of Indonesian students in China, the Chinese government's skilful diplomacy especially vis-à-vis large Muslim organisations like NU and Muhammadiyah, and the absence of much contact with ordinary Uyghurs all contribute to the reluctance to speak out.

Many of the Indonesians who express scepticism about Western media coverage of Xinjiang are also leery of China's economic programs and especially the way the Belt and Road Initiative for infrastructure construction is playing out in Indonesia, so distrust of the West does not necessarily translate into enthusiastic embrace of China. At the same time, the Indonesians who seem the most willing to accept Chinese statements on the Uyghurs at face value may be the least likely to take broader issues of economic policy into account. China's overall investment in Indonesia may matter less than the largesse distributed by the Chinese embassy to pesantrens at Ramadhan. If fear of offending a major investor and trading partner had been the major driver of policy toward the Uyghurs, surely Indonesia would have sent back all of the Uyghurs accused of terrorism, especially when Chinese pressure to do so was enormous.

This leads to a final point. A striking aspect of Indonesian policy toward the Uyghurs is how little terrorism enters into it. The Uyghurs in Poso have been largely forgotten, and no one seems concerned that increased restrictions in Xinjiang could lead to greater radicalisation or to possible attempts to mount attacks outside China. Whatever arguments Chinese officials make about Uyghurs being separatists, terrorists and religious extremists, Indonesians have been most focused on the first. More than any other reason for avoiding criticism of China, the conviction that separatism is a domestic issue may rank highest.

Anyone interested in persuading Indonesia to take a more prominent role in defending Uyghur rights needs to understand the local dynamics. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, its advocacy on behalf of an oppressed Muslim minority matters, and its voice would be welcome in support of an independent investigation into human rights violations in Xinjiang. The sceptics, however, will be hard to convince.

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