

## The "orang gila" scare in Indonesia

In the past couple of months, a regular feature of the right wing (for lack of a better term) Indonesian Facebook groups I follow has been "news" of attempted attacks on *ulama* by *orang gila*—"crazy people".

Posts about these purported attacks take a similar form: a video or series of photos with a brief description of an incident in which an unknown person makes a threatening appearance at a mosque, *pesantren* or *ulama*'s house. After being detained by an emotional mob, this *orang gila* is sometimes said to have "confessed" to being a "sympathiser" of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Many posts describe the assailant as *pura-pura gila* or "pretending to be crazy". (A Facebook or Twitter search of "pura-pura gila" or "orang gila" will yield a representative enough sample of these videos; some, I should warn, include distressing vision of purported attackers—many of whom really do not appear to be mentally well—being manhandled or beaten by the crowd.)

This week, the *orang gila* issue breached the confines of social media and achieved cut-through. After a meeting with the senior police and antiterror officials, Indonesia Ulama Council (MUI) chairman Din Syamsuddin said that [police were aware of 21 cases of attacks on ulama since December 2017](#). The mainstream news media is now devoting considerable coverage to the *orang gila* attacks.

The government and its supporters don't seem to know how to spin it. Jokowi has instructed the police to [deal "firmly" with those responsible](#) for attacks on religious leaders, while his chief detective has suggested, in quite vague terms, that [the orang gila issue is an orchestrated hoax](#). The police's spokesman said that [some reports of attacks were hoaxes, others not](#). Nadhlatul Ulama chairman Said Aqil Siroj has doubted that the attackers were *gila* at all, telling Metro TV that the wave of attacks appeared [too "tidy, systematic, and orderly"](#) to be the work of the mentally ill. Health Minister Nina Moeloek had to [reassure the public](#) that "*orang gila*" cannot be "taught" to attack *ulama*.

Jokowi's political opponents, meanwhile, have seen political opportunity. The tireless Fadli Zon went to the trouble of writing a poem about how ["crazy people are becoming more](#)

[dangerous/massacring ustadz \[religious teachers\] so callously](#)". He had earlier told reporters that *ulama* in his electorate had discovered that their homes had been "[marked](#)" with [strange symbols](#), as if for future targeting.

In an attempt to display that they're taking the issue seriously, [local authorities across Java have begun](#) rounding up *orang gila* on the streets and transferring them to (presumably abysmal) care facilities.

Indeed, it's more than a little curious that the *orang gila* scare is making headlines at the start of a year in which three vote-rich provinces in Java will elect governors ahead of the April 2019 presidential polls. Politicians are already trading accusations: PPP party chairman Romahurmuziy, a Jokowi ally, has said that the attacks were the work of an unnamed "powerful figure" with an interest in [discrediting the Jokowi government ahead of the upcoming elections](#). This is a pretty transparent swipe at Prabowo Subianto; the Secretary-General of Prabowo's Gerindra party took Romahurmuziy's bait and [dismissed the idea](#) that the attacks had anything to do with politics.

Of course, this is also occurring in a climate of renewed [paranoia about the reemergence of the PKI](#). A seemingly coordinated wave of attacks on Islamic leaders from an shadowy enemy will trigger memories in many Indonesian minds of the violence committed by PKI members towards *ulama* during the Soekarno era. It's also difficult to avoid being reminded of [the "ninja" killings in East Java in the 1990s](#).

Whatever is going on here (and I won't pretend to have any idea) it's interesting to see it in light of the debate following the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election over [whether Jokowi could be "Ahoked" in 2019](#)—that is, [taken down by a dirty tricks campaign](#) designed to inflame the sentiments of Muslim voters. Jokowi is known to be seriously concerned about Indonesia's "fake news" problem, being a common target of [hoaxes spread on social media already](#). The president could be forgiven for harbouring a little paranoia about whether the real target of the *orang gila* is not Javanese *ulama*, but himself.

If any other Indonesia-watchers reading this post have relevant observations, information, or speculation on what the *orang gila* scare might mean, please contact me at [liam.gammon@anu.edu.au](mailto:liam.gammon@anu.edu.au).