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Performing Peace: The Evolving Roles of Security Groups in Indonesia

Laurens Bakker* and Ahmad Karim

Indonesia has a large number of civil society militia organisations that profess to safeguard peace and security in society. Generally associated with specific ethnic or religious groups, these civil militias police their territories and threaten (and sometimes apply) violence in order to discipline wrongdoers. Their actions influence social order and peace, and while many are usually low profile and have limited impact, actions that bring maximum effect are crucial for their fame and reputation. We consider such actions as performances in which their perspectives on order and peace are presented and invite acceptance (or rejection) by society. This is done in ways that emphasise cultural or moral elements over the potential for violence. Using examples from Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Java we consider the effects of such public displays in shaping everyday peace.

Keywords: Indonesia; Ormas; Vigilantes; Violence; Performance; Terrorism; Peace; Banser; Dayak; Manguni

I yayat u santi! (Raise your weapons!) My name is Jerry Denny Lopian. I am a *tonaas* (customary leader) of Brigade Manguni Indonesia, fully supporting the government in fighting the corona Covid-19 virus. For that reason, I ask all Indonesian people, but specifically those of North Sulawesi, to stay at home and stop going out for the time being. Let us all not forget to frequently wash our hands and be careful, be careful, be careful. *I yayat u santi!*

These are the words to a short video uploaded on YouTube in March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic was spreading globally.¹ Lopian, the speaker, is a *tonaas* (leader) of Brigade Manguni Indonesia (hereafter BMI), an *ormas* (*organisasi kemasyarakatan*, a people's/civil society organisation) from the province of North Sulawesi.² The message is clear: stay at home, avoid contact, frequently disinfect your

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hands and be careful. This considerate and clear message might seem surprising given that BMI is a militant organisation that was founded in 2000 to fight off a feared invasion by Islamist Laskar Jihad fighters in the predominantly Christian province (see Henley, Schouten, & Ulaen 2007; Bakker 2017a, 145–148).³ BMI has thousands of uniformed members controlled through a well-organised command structure. Not all of these people embody martial prowess—they comprise elderly, pot-bellied retirees, skinny kids, and motherly matrons as well as muscle-packed ‘machos’—yet they form an organisation that can mobilise large numbers of people in a short time.

BMI is a prominent actor in maintaining order in northern Sulawesi, and as the threat of violent extremist attack (from Laskar Jihad) decreased, BMI took on a variety of other perceived dangers to local peace. These include assistance after natural disasters such as landslides, volcanic eruptions and floods; mediation of conflicts between neighbours; and road improvement and minor construction work. ‘We provide security and assistance to the people of the Minahasa.’⁴ Nowadays we fight Covid, but we are ready to defend against human invaders again’, another *tonaas* told author Laurens Bakker in December 2020. To engage in violence is a rare occurrence for BMI members, but their readiness to do so gives the organisation a voice in defining what constitutes ‘peace’ in the province.

Paramilitary *ormas* like BMI, with a capacity for violence and a reputation for violent actions, exist throughout Indonesia. These groups draw their membership from local communities and are localised and self-policing. They often have links to local criminal networks and into local government and seek to maintain a specific notion of order and security (e.g. Telle 2013; Wilson 2015, 2017; Bakker 2015; Facal 2020). Some militias muster only a few dozen members and are little more than a neighbourhood watch group, others are regional organisations with hundreds or thousands of members, and a handful—such as Banser discussed below—have a nationwide presence and claim a membership of millions. While a few of these organisations have a much longer history, many came into existence around the turn of the century. This was a tumultuous time: President Suharto suddenly stepped down in 1998 after over thirty years in power. His New Order regime had kept a tight rein on the nation, its citizens and its government assisted by paramilitary groups like Pemuda Pancasila, who provided an organisational blueprint for many vigilante *ormas* of today (cf. Wilson 2010, 2015). The *reformasi* (reform) politics enabled by President Suharto’s successors included decentralisation of political authority, democratisation and freedom of expression.⁵ Regional identity, defined through indigeneity, ethnicity and religion, became more prominent politically and socially than it had been during the New Order. In several parts of the country such differences gave rise to bloody conflicts in which local mostly non-state actors rather than the army and police were central in restoring order (see van Klinken 2007; Bräuchler 2015). Many of today’s vigilante groups justify their existence by pointing out the danger of such conflicts recurring and their role in avoiding this. They argue that as locals they are much more likely to observe increasing tensions in local relations and they are better

placed to settle such conflicts than police or other officials. Moreover, as locals the continuity of local peace is of direct relevance to their own wellbeing. No *ormas* members we spoke to considered that government officials were not concerned to maintain local peace, but a lack of understanding of local circumstances or a tendency to focus on other interests, particularly if officials were of migrant origin, were regularly mentioned. A final point concerns the government's reaction speed. Often, local *ormas* arrive rapidly to a crisis scene such as a conflict, fire, flood, theft or other local problems, and these rapid reactions count towards their reputation.

Our purpose in this article is to critically consider how such *ormas* seek to shape and uphold local peace, responding to immediate situations of local crises as well as making more consequential large-scale interventions in social order. We are especially interested in the effects of such larger public interventions. For it is in relation to these interventions that *ormas* perspectives on order and peace are considered, accepted or rejected by a broad audience that reaches beyond their members and the local community. Here *ormas* presentations of local peace are judged—and accepted or rejected—by society at large and, importantly, by the state. We begin by discussing the room for manoeuvre for such vigilante *ormas* in performing everyday peace in Indonesia. This is followed by three brief ethnographic examples that illustrate disruptions and reconstitution of peace in particular settings: the aforementioned BMI in Minahasa; the LPADKT (Laskar Pemuda Adat Dayak Kalimantan Timur, Army of Traditional Dayak Youth in East Kalimantan); and the nationwide Banser (Barisan Ansor Serbaguna, Ansor's multipurpose troops).⁶ Based on these, we consider the qualities of such *ormas* as agents of peace in Indonesian society.

Performing Peace

What constitutes 'peace' in the settings that we are looking at? None of the three areas we write about, fortunately, has experienced open war or large-scale violent conflict in the past two decades, but the absence of open violence says little about the quality of the prevailing peace. As Johan Galtung (1969) suggests, peace can be a condition of social circumstances acceptable to (most of) the population, but that does not mean that the resulting societal order is equally beneficial or equally just to all. Nor can we assume that peace is a uniform condition, identified by general elements that have universal validity. Roger Mac Ginty (2013) emphasises the need for micro-level analyses of lived everyday peace in order to pick up the nuances of what the people living in a locality understand peace to be. He conceives of such 'everyday peace' as inclusive of routinised practices and coping mechanisms that allow different population groups to navigate their way in a divided society that might simultaneously be prone to chronic structural violence and episodic outbreaks of direct conflict (Mac Ginty 2014, 549). The peace that is manifest at a local level of society is dynamic and political in nature. Its study must, therefore, include an understanding of the

local power structures and hierarchies in order to discern limitations and opportunities for reconciliation in cases of conflict (cf. Bräuchler & Naucke 2017, 432). This observation is sustained by the existing literature on violent conflicts in Indonesia (e.g. Bertrand 2004; van Klinken 2007; Davidson 2008; Bräuchler 2009; Barron 2019), which shows that these conflicts are rarely binary but rather comprise multiple parties and stakeholders whose engagement and influence differs and often alters as the conflict progresses.⁷ Peace is a communal outcome shaped by the interests of diverse parties who may choose to test its endurance and elasticity if doing so appears to advantage their position.

These insights gain traction through several elements central to *ormas* room for manoeuvre. First, *ormas* build on a well-established societal repertoire in which ‘strongmen’, operating with relative impunity, maintain order in society. These are ‘tough guys’ with a reputation for violence, proficient in magic and connected to those in power who can protect them from reactions by police or other official authorities (cf. Schulte Nordholt 1991; Ryter 1998). Second, whereas such protection can take the form of patronage provided by a leading figure in the political elite (Ryter 1998), regular elections and stronger democratic institutions introduced following *reformasi* have limited politicians’ tenure and influence. While political contacts remain relevant, many of today’s *ormas* favour an enduring affiliation to a neighbourhood, an ethnic group or a community over close ties to a specific politician. Many *ormas* are also aware that a sole emphasis on violent capacities—the qualities that enabled their rise to prominence two decades ago—is out of alignment in today’s mostly peaceful Indonesia. Attention to issues such as human and indigenous rights, democratic representation, and the drive to get the voices of the underrepresented heard resound considerably better with groups in society that they aspire to represent (see also Wilson 2006, 275; Wilson 2010, 201; Bakker 2015). *Ormas* can actively extend internal cohesion in sizeable minorities—or even majorities—of the population in election times, which may see them operate as political actors in their own right (see Nugroho & Wilson 2014; Wilson 2015; Bakker 2016).

In addition, *ormas* generally follow the discursive reproduction of threats used by the national government in which the provision of security and the maintenance of order are crucial tasks of the state as well as the population.⁸ This perspective provides a route to more formal legitimacy as various government programmes actually call for militia-like initiatives. Such calls provide official reasons for *ormas* to exist as military-like organisations that act and appear like official security personnel. Regional autonomy has provided an impetus for giving increased weight to customary norms and institutions in local societies (e.g. Davidson & Henley 2007; Bakker 2017b), and this has been realised in the aesthetics of indigenous culture—which had become performative, comprising decontextualised symbols of Indonesian unity—and now adopted by *ormas* to emphasise ethnic identity. Building on the *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (‘Unity in Diversity’) national motto, such performances demonstrate identity, ethnicity and societal presence. These can be displays of graceful, cultured refinement or demonstrate martial prowess, depending on the

intended effect and message. Yet, our final point here, by relating to existing state repertoires, *ormas* only have space for shaping order and peace through conditions set by the state. These include the primacy of Pancasila, the unity of the Indonesian state and the priority of government in defining threats to society and passing national laws. While these conditions in reality can be porous and vague, flaunting them invites government reprisals. Similarly, provocations against Islam—the majority religion—are likely to cause angry reactions from large parts of the population.

In this article, our interest lies in how these elements shape and limit performance of peace in society by *ormas*. By ‘performance’ we mean carrying out mundane daily activities such as running a nightwatch or regulating motor-parking, but we include grander, less regular public events that embody statements about norms and relations in society. Such performances can function to (re)produce a social order and enrol its citizen subjects (Pereault 2015, 449) by having them—as an audience—witness and endorse the versions of events put before them (cf. Denskus 2014). An audience that witnesses a performance and voices their support provides legitimation to the kind of order performed, whereas objections from the audience could weaken the legitimacy of what is displayed. Shape and content are, therefore, important: a display of Dayak war dances by the LPADKT as part of a protest could for instance be interpreted as a threat of violence by members of other ethnic groups but might purport to be nationalistic if the dancers carry Indonesian flags.

Performance also concerns concealment—what is not displayed—and controlling who sees what and when (Goldstein 2004, 16). As we will see below, police officials do not consider such dancers as a threat while in public view and in traditional dress, but these officials are aware that things might be different when the audience has dispersed and the dancers have changed into anonymous street clothes. A dance may also camouflage real intentions—such concealment working to subvert and uphold social order at the same time (see Jusionyte 2015, 129–130). These dancers may state that their purpose is to perform a customary dance, but if that dance concerns a ritual for banning evil spirits the covert message is clear enough.

Our selection of cases aims to examine how *ormas* go about such performances, arguing, displaying and enacting their role in the maintenance and alteration of local order and peace. Our first case concerns evolving strategies of Dayak representation (within and beyond the LPADKT), focusing on an individual female leader and her evolving relations with government. The second case looks at how BMI, while popular in North Sulawesi, represents a minority religious group in Indonesia at large. The group is vulnerable when a mosque is destroyed and BMI is blamed, but its local relevance provides the support of influential partners in settling the matter. The third case discusses a nationwide public display of commitment by Banser, which emphasises national unity, a clear condemnation of critiques of distinctly Indonesian practices of Islamic observance and the drive for an Islamic state.

Championing Dayak Interests in East Kalimantan

East Kalimantan is among Indonesia's most important areas for production of coal and palm oil. The province has some sixty larger (over 100 members) security-oriented *ormas* of which we are aware. Of these *ormas* many are formed by groups within the Indigenous population such as Dayak, Kutai, Tidung and Paser. Land claims based on customary rights are a frequently recurring issue. Customary (*adat*) land rights, these groups maintain, have been violated since colonial times but particularly during the New Order when exploitation of natural resources took off on a grand scale. Complaints about such 'land theft' to officials and companies fell on deaf ears. Protests were broken up and protesters often detained for weeks or months. This led to grave feelings of injustice that, following *reformasi*, are expressed vocally throughout the various provinces of Kalimantan.

Events reached a crucial point in the provinces of West and Central Kalimantan where Indigenous Dayak and Malayu fighters forcibly evicted thousands of Madurese transmigrants in a series of conflicts in 1997, 1999 and 2001. Hundreds were killed. The conflicts reinforced a stereotype of Dayak as fierce and capable fighters who had revived ancestral traditions of head-hunting and black magic in contemporary conflicts (see van Klinken 2007; de Jonge & Nooteboom 2006). While East Kalimantan saw no such large-scale inter group conflict, members of its Dayak communities took their lead from those in West and Central Kalimantan and organised themselves in *ormas* that claimed recognition of customary land rights and demanded indemnification for resources already exploited. Protests by dozens of Dayak *ormas* members—dressed in a mixture of military style-camouflage, army boots, customary loin cloths and towering, feathered headgear—caused unease among mining and plantation officials and increased their willingness to engage in dialogue (see Bakker 2009).

The LPADKT is one such *ormas*. While it is smaller than other indigenous *ormas*, the group claims to have 18,000 members throughout the province. Its style of acting is straightforward. First, a party will be informed of a complaint against it, such as their appropriation of land claimed by an indigenous person under *adat* rights. If the party is unwilling to cede land or pay compensation, dozens of members will stage a protest, including performing dances and blocking traffic. It was explained to Bakker that such a protest constitutes a formal final warning (see Bakker 2015). 'As long as they wear those *adat* costumes, there is no need to worry', a senior police official explained, 'If they get up to violence, it will occur afterwards, and they [the perpetrators] will be anonymous'. Such violence can allegedly entail the destruction of vehicles and buildings, arson, poisoning of wells and trees, and beating up individuals. The LPADKT thus has a reputation as aggressive and even though its protests are generally peaceful, they attract considerable police attention. While the stand-offs look fierce, what sets the LPADKT events apart from those of other *ormas* is the presence of women in traditional, festive Dayak attire at these events. 'Dayak are not just men, and we are not just aggressive. People need to see that', Bakker was told by Mei Christy Sengoq, who became head of the LPADKT

in 2004. A young and outspoken woman, Mei rose through the ranks of the LPADKT as she put considerable time and energy into establishing the organisation, cohesion and reputation of the *ormas*.

Mei introduced an alternative style to the group's repertoire. She visited a beauty salon before demonstrating, flirted with the riot police and generally emphasised her femininity in contrast to the muscles and bravado of the male LPADKT members. Her strategy added a new element to the demonstrations, attracted press attention and loaned the LPADKT a less threatening appearance. Bringing women out in public proved a successful and novel way to influence the—mostly male—authorities. When, for instance, in November 2017, 27 male LPADKT members were detained by police in the city of Tenggarong after a particularly boisterous demonstration, Mei collected their families and brought them to the police station where the husbands and fathers were held. The presence of a large group of crying women and children resulted in the release of the men within four days. Members of another indigenous *ormas* assured Bakker that release could normally take up to a month.

These *ormas* spokespersons believed that the police felt embarrassed by the crying women, but while Mei agreed, she also felt that the involvement of the wives, who were from various ethnic groups, carried the issue beyond the Dayak community. Through these women, the injustices argued against began to resound with a larger part of the province's population. Mei sought to make the 'macho' and Dayak-focused *ormas* more inclusive by expanding beyond—if not abandoning—its ethnic and violent reputation. She began to bring in people from other groups experiencing similar land loss as a result of resource extraction and directly engaged government and company officials in dialogue. Heading a customary dance troupe, she would perform Dayak dances at government meetings and speak to the officials present.⁹ Within the LPADKT she started a Laskar Wanita (Women's Army) but was disappointed by the result. While women joined the Laskar Wanita, they were timid and silent during LPADKT meetings. Outside the LPADKT these women were more outspoken, and Mei transitioned to a less militant and more activist role. As head of the provincial Koalisi Keadilan Bagi Perempuan (KKBP, Coalition for Justice for Women) and coordinating the Aksi Perempuan Bersatu (APB, United Women Action), she began to champion the plight of women and children in East Kalimantan generally, while not losing sight of Dayak issues.

Increasingly side-lined in the LPADKT as (male) leaders preferred to continue with their ethnically exclusive and martial approach, Mei abandoned her official role in the organisation in 2017. She had been invited in 2016 to advise President Joko Widodo on the issues in East Kalimantan (see Evrai 2016). She and Widodo got along well, Mei told Bakker. More meetings and invitations to Jakarta have followed—including a request to perform at the presidential palace with her dance troupe—and her focus on women's rights resounds better in government circles than an ethnic, militant approach. She does however retain good contacts with the LPADKT, whose assistance she can call on.¹⁰

Whereas both the LPADKT and Mei Christy refer to *adat* and Dayak identity in their public actions, they differ in their emphasis: for the LPADKT this identity designates them as ‘dangerous’ whereas Mei emphasises the grace and friendliness of a female Dayak dancer and mobilises wider segments of society through broadly shared concerns. The ‘performance’ works differently for each. For the LPADKT it signifies exclusive indigeneity and customary rights, as well as a message of potential violence. For Mei, such performances as dancing at official occasions enable contacts within political circles and the development of a Dayak image that is more friendly and in line with notions of unity and nationalism. Mei can ‘call up’ violence from the LPADKT, but she can also contact the staff of the nation’s president to bring their attention to an issue. Such diverse performances of Dayak identity allow Mei to generate impact that extends beyond the singular repertoire of potential violence at various levels and with different stakeholders.

Anti-Terrorism in North Sulawesi

As mentioned above, BMI came into existence to resist a feared invasion by Islamic fighters in predominantly Christian North Sulawesi. While such attacks are no longer an immediate concern, the threat of Muslim aggression underpins BMI’s sense of its own relevance. The province’s capital Manado—and North Sulawesi more generally—is considered a high-risk area for terrorist attacks by many among its population. As a BMI member explained to Bakker:

To the west of us are the Moluccas, they have had some serious religious fighting and there are fanatics there. To the north are the Philippines, Mindanao, with terrorists from Abu Sayyaf, Maute, Jemaah Islamiyah. To the south is Central Sulawesi, Poso. There are foreign terrorists there wanting to start a caliphate. To the east is Malaysia, but many terrorists in Indonesia actually came from there.

While terrorist attacks in the area have been rare, a steady stream of stories of near-attacks and suspected arrests circulate among the population and many worry about this danger. Several of these stories feature BMI leaders taking a leading role in neutralising the attackers (see Bakker 2016, 258–259). BMI collaborates with the local police and government in patrols and intelligence gathering. The region has a very long coastline where boats can land unobserved. Police presence is limited beyond the cities and other urban centres. BMI members patrol the beaches, and their family, friends and neighbours are involved in a wide network of informants reporting unusual events or the presence of strangers. The shared fear that they—as Christians—could be the subject of an attack by Muslim terrorists from surrounding areas explains the wide participation in that network.

Contrary to the LPADKT consideration of local government as an opposing force because of its support for mining and plantations, BMI collaborates closely with government and is present and visible on official occasions. Its members parade on National Independence Day, for example. BMI members perform traditional war

dances for government guests, demonstrate their invulnerability magic and give inspiring public speeches. On the organisation's birthday, government officials attend the festivities as guests of honour. For over a decade, Max Togas, a lawyer and a senior *tonaas*, has represented BMI in discussions with the National Anti-Terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, BNPT). When BNPT established a North Sulawesi Terrorism Prevention Coordination Forum (Forum Koordinasi Pencegahan Terorisme, FKPT) in 2019, Togas became its chairman. This forum functions to undertake further research into the development and spread of extremism, as well as implement prevention programmes in relation to the latter. Through Togas, BMI is a central participant.

Yet recently BMI was itself accused of terrorism. In January 2020 a video of an angry mob destroying a meeting hall in the village of Tumoluntung went viral on social media. The mob, identified by commentators as BMI members, was allegedly angered by the illegal use of the meeting hall for prayers by Muslim immigrants. With a 95 per cent Christian population in the area, these residents argued that they did not want to be disturbed by the calls to prayer or by the traffic and people attracted by the prayer session.¹¹ The story swiftly became one purporting that wild Christian attackers had savaged a mosque, infuriating Muslims in other parts of Indonesia, who called for reprisals against BMI.¹² Provincial police reacted swiftly, announcing that they had arrested a ringleader and were confident that they would soon arrest his accomplices (see Santoso 2020). Yet they also pointed out that no permit had been issued to use the building for religious purposes, implying a partial justification for the attack. The chair of a BMI offshoot group publicly reacted to the destruction by stating that the perpetrators were irresponsible 'unknowns' from outside the area and not BMI members. He stated that while his members were willing to assist in rebuilding the hall, until a permit was obtained the Muslim prayer sessions held there should cease in order to avoid future violence (Yusri 2020).

The issue was resolved within days because the provincial office of the Ministry of Religion recommended that the provincial government permit the building of a mosque (JPNN.com 2020). BMI announced its support for this recommendation. The provincial branch head of the National Council of Ulama (MUI) made it known that the conflict was the result of a misunderstanding, claiming that provocateurs from outside the community were seeking to upset the good relations between religious groups in the area. Religious leaders from the area would work closely with the police to settle the issue, he continued, and he opined that appreciation of the nation's unity would further assist in settling the matter (Permana 2020).¹³ The case could have ended differently, however. Participants on social media platforms called for Muslims throughout Indonesia to come to Tumoluntung to punish the perpetrators and rebuild the 'mosque'—as it was referred to—echoing the fear of a Laskar Jihad invasion of two decades earlier. Peace was maintained but it required a trade-off that rendered BMI indebted to those who came to its support.

The case illustrates how everyday peace can be threatened by sudden triggers. The performance here is not carried out or controlled by BMI; rather, the organisation became the subject of outside anger by individuals and groups far removed from the scene of destruction but motivated by revenge for a perceived attack on Muslims. BMI felt unable to counter accusations for fear of prolonging the outrage. The maintenance of peace in Minahasa, which BMI states to be its main purpose, was thus upheld by local Muslims whose voices, through the MUI, were instrumental in quelling what became a nationwide protest and, as a Minahasan Muslim told Bakker in March 2020, ‘perhaps were responsible for rescuing some hot-headed Christians’. Some BMI members argued that their organisation’s silence and patient enduring of the ‘slander’ did in fact contribute significantly to the keeping of the peace, as did BMI’s acceptance of the mosque ‘forced’ upon them. These members considered the case to uphold the relevance of *ormas* in the Minahasa since it demonstrated the hatred harboured by outside Muslims towards the Christian BMI and, hence, the need for ongoing vigilance.

Banser’s One Nation Parade

Banser is quite possibly the oldest and largest vigilante *ormas* in Indonesia. Originating in 1937 in East Java, it is part of Ansor, the youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia’s largest Islamic organisation. Banser members fought Dutch troops in the war for independence and took part in the mass killings of communists in 1965–1966. NU, Ansor and Banser supported President Suharto during the New Order regime but threw their weight behind *reformasi* once it came about. They were particularly prominent during the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001), the second *reformasi* president who, as a former chairman of NU (1984–1999), had close relations with its leadership in terms of shared ideas on religion, society and politics. Through Wahid, NU and its organisations became more politically influential and more strongly defined in their societal positions.

In 2000 Wahid faced impeachment. In reaction, thousands of Banser Pasukan Berani Mati (‘Ready-to-Die Troops’) converged on the national parliament to defend his presidency (see van Bruinessen 2002, 33). Wahid stepped down voluntarily and violence was avoided, but this action strongly associated Banser with the traditional values of Indonesian Islam championed by Wahid. NU and Banser grew considerably in popularity as a result and achieved prominent social presence. Banser claims a membership of seven million (Wijayanti 2019) and has chapters throughout most of Indonesia, although it remains strongest in East Java. Its members are mostly young, from relatively modest economic and educational backgrounds. Members told Karim that they had joined in order to engage in new, interesting and socially useful activities; to follow the religious pathways of the *kyai* (religious scholars) (*nderek poro kyai*); to serve NU (*berkhidmat kepada NU*); and, perhaps, gain connections or even jobs through this network. Others expressed hope for a career in politics or government. This is perhaps not unrealistic: Banser

cadres from the village level upwards receive training and gain experience in public leadership and in community organising. A Banser membership is considered a useful springboard for those aspiring to enter politics, administration or other (public) functions.

Banser proclaims itself a guardian of religious tolerance. In doing so, it positions itself against fundamentalist and other Saudi-influenced Islamic groups that came to the fore during *reformasi* (such groups aim to ‘purify’ Indonesia’s colourful Islam). Banser’s main antagonist was Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Front of the Defenders of Islam), a hardline Islamic organisation that combined violence against religious minorities, on-the-ground Islamic morality policing, and wider application of political and social pressure to shift Indonesia towards a more observant and stricter Islamic nation (see Woodward et al. 2014). Like Banser, FPI had a considerable following, connections to politicians, and a network of supporters in government, the army and police.¹⁴ The two organisations differed sharply in their perspective on the state, with Banser supporting Indonesia’s religious pluralism and the ‘domesticated’, uniquely Indonesian Islam of NU; while FPI spokespersons expressed the desire to see Indonesia purify Islamic practice and become an Islamic state governed by sharia law. While they competed at many levels of society and government, their antagonism was frequently visible at the street level with physical violence between members of the two organisations on multiple occasions (see Ariwibowo 2008; Muhyiddin 2017; CNN Indonesia 2019) with each organisation mounting large public manifestations.¹⁵

In September 2018 Ansor and Banser organised a 41-day ‘One Nation Parade’ (Kirab Satu Negeri), an event in which groups of thousands of uniformed members departed from five locations at the nation’s borders to march across Indonesia and arrive in Yogyakarta. Using the slogan ‘*kita ini sama—bela agama, bangsa, negeri*’ (‘we together—defend religion, nation, state’) the organisers declared that the event sought to strengthen Indonesians’ commitment to the unity of their state with Pancasila as its basis, and against discourses arguing for an Islamic state (cf. Alawi 2018). Participants carried Indonesian flags, held religious and social meetings with local communities, demonstrated their skills in invulnerability magic and martial arts, and prayed at the tombs of the Wali Sanga (the legendary nine saints regarded as the propagators of Islam in Java, the cornerstone of local Islamic traditions) and other saints across the country. They were welcomed by local supporters, received by politicians and frequently allowed to sleep in police or army barracks. On a few occasions FPI and others staged demonstrations in protest, but such objections remained largely limited to numbers of FPI and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) flags flying along some parts of the parade’s route, which the participants generally ignored.¹⁶ The parade attracted considerable attention in the social media, putting Ansor, Banser and their message of tolerance, diversity and peace in the public spotlight. It was planned that President Joko Widodo would welcome them in Yogyakarta on 26 October and be presented with a national flag by a delegation of parade participants, symbolising their commitment to Indonesia and its elected government.

Then, on 22 October during one of the parade's major rallies, several members burned an HTI flag, a video of which went viral.¹⁷ The burning shocked the Indonesian public as the flag depicted the Arabic text of the *tauhid*, the essence of the Islamic faith. Destroying the *tauhid* was offensive to many Muslims, including Banser and Ansor members. The flag-burners were arrested by the police, the closing ceremony cancelled, and FPI and others took to the streets to demonstrate against Banser. In Yogyakarta, Banser members brought out knives, swords, sticks and other weapons in preparation for physical confrontation in lieu of the ceremony, telling Karim that 'it had been a long time since Banser had a fight'. Ansor's leadership reacted quickly, publicly apologising to all Indonesians for the resulting unrest and explaining that the action had been spontaneous and not premeditated. No apology was issued for the burning of the flag however, as Ansor's chairman explained that this was the flag of HTI, an illegal organisation, and not a flag of the *tauhid* (Siddiq 2018).

Nevertheless, the nationwide public performance of Ansor's idea of Indonesian stability was dramatically impacted by these events. The closing ceremony, the grand finale with President Widodo, was cancelled and mass brawls between armed Banser members and their FPI opponents were narrowly averted. Yet, according to our interlocutors, the swift public apology and the absence of violence demonstrated Banser's restraint and its sincere dedication to peace. This outcome did not harm Banser or Ansor, who received the backing of senior religious clerics and politicians as well as the sympathy of a large part of the population. Attention for the incident fizzled out quickly. Following the 2020 elections, Joko Widodo included senior Banser leaders in his national government. FPI was banned by the national authorities in December 2020 for using violence against civilians, among other reasons.¹⁸ However, as a Banser leader told Bakker, 'banning FPI removes the vehicle, not the driver nor the passengers'. Banser's vigilance, according to him, remains essential as 'those people might well go looking for another ride'.

Conclusion

We have sought to show that the provision and maintenance of peace in Indonesian society is the domain of multiple actors. The *ormas* that we have discussed position themselves prominently as providers of this role: by representing specific groups or communities, and by emphasising the dangers threatening social order and their own capacities in neutralising these, they claim a position of societal expertise, credibility and capacity. Somewhat ironically perhaps, their capacities for violence sit uneasily with such claims. Violent capacities qualify them as providers of security to some but make them potentially dangerous to others. Such a Janus-faced approach suggests a limited and now outdated societal repertoire that emphasises animosity between groups and fails to recognise that Indonesian society is (mostly) peaceful. Vigilante *ormas* have maintained their social and political relevance by expanding beyond

the use of physical violence as a threat. Addressing Covid-19, the action with which this article opened, finds them utilising organisational structures rather than martial prowess to warn and inform society. Yet, as with violent actions, to be effective in such social action, *ormas* must show that their presence and actions resonate with society's norms, needs and fears. Engagement in the struggle to counter Covid-19 fits these closely, so foregrounding non-violent credentials.

While many such social and non-violent actions concern small day-to-day activities that pass unnoticed to most of society, large public actions in which *ormas* demonstrate their perspectives on local peace act as major tests of their standing and credibility. Such actions are often orchestrated events with specific performative qualities that, while drawing on local precepts, speak to an established national repertoire that affirms the authority of the state. To succeed and legitimise the *ormas* action, the performance must be appreciated by society as well as by state authorities. Failure would indicate poor understanding of society and weak ties to officialdom; the *ormas* would thus lack relevance and its reason for being would be questioned.

In daily affairs, *ormas* point out the threats to society's peace that they claim to mitigate. In the above we discussed such threats as land 'theft' by mining and plantation companies, Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and Indonesia becoming an Islamic state. In addressing these threats, *ormas* attempt to demonstrate their social relevance but also risk repercussions in doing so. LPADKT protesters were jailed by the police, while the flag burning in Banser's Parade threatened a carefully orchestrated campaign that championed Banser's take on peace. Also, as both this case and that of the burning of the meeting hall indicate, an *ormas* can be accused of an action it denies 'performing' (it was argued that the flag burned was not of the *tauhid* but of an illegal organisation, and that the meeting hall in Tumoluntung was not attacked by BMI members), making it necessary to mitigate negative consequences by demonstrating the capacity to re-establish order and calm society. Such actions bring to the surface important elements of local peace that must be achieved through negotiation with other parties who may be supportive or, on the contrary, may have conflicting interests. In order to succeed, *ormas* thus need to mobilise broad societal contacts and relations that range beyond the groups they seek to represent. Mei Christy began to develop such relations for the LPADKT by involving other ethnic groups. MUI's support for BMI suggests a working relation in North Sulawesi that transcends religious differences. Banser's involvement in national government suggests that it is appreciated at that level as a partner in maintaining civic peace. Through these examples we have sought to demonstrate that such militant *ormas* representing particular interests may, perhaps paradoxically, serve as agents of peace in situations of social conflict. For them to succeed in a broader, everyday performance of peace depends on them achieving acceptance and endorsement of their actions by a wider public beyond the communities they claim to represent.

Notes

- [1] The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhTJsr65oL8>. 'I Yayat u Santi' is Brigade Manguni Indonesia's slogan (or 'war cry', as some members refer to it). It translates as 'raise your weapons'.
- [2] An *ormas* is defined by law as 'an organisation voluntarily formed by members of the community of Indonesian citizens based on shared activities, professions, functions, religions, and belief in God, to participate in development in order to achieve national goals in the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila' (Article 1, Law 8 of 1985). This is a broad definition that includes all sorts of people's and civil society organisations, including aid foundations, medical organisations and nature conservationists. Our focus pertains to *ormas* who give the provision of security as their main goal and who have indicated or demonstrated their willingness to use violence (the legitimacy of which is problematic, but not impossible under Indonesian law) in doing so.
- [3] Laskar Jihad was an anti-Christian, Islamist militia originating in Java that contributed fighters to religious conflicts in Poso and the Moluccas (see van Klinken 2007, 84–85; Bakker 2016, 256–257). Both of these areas are near North Sulawesi. As Laskar Jihad fighters did not come to the province, BMI maintains that it sent some of its fighters to Poso instead, so gaining credibility as violent actors.
- [4] 'Minahasa' geographically refers to the northern peninsula of Sulawesi, which is divided into the provinces of Gorontalo (which is predominantly Muslim) and North Sulawesi (which is predominantly Christian). BMI considers North Sulawesi to be the Minahasa heartland, but Minahasans can also live in Gorontalo or elsewhere.
- [5] The Indonesian government comprises national, provincial and regional levels, each of which has parliaments and heads that are directly elected by the population and authorised to issue legislation.
- [6] The authors have conducted extensive fieldwork and research among these organisations. Bakker was introduced to the LPDKT and BMI in 2004 and has continued working with them in multiple successive research visits. Karim carried out extensive fieldwork within Banser as part of his PhD field research conducted in 2018–2019.
- [7] This observation can also be made for conflicts beyond Indonesia (e.g. Höglund & Kovacs 2010; Wilson & Bakker 2016).
- [8] An example of a joint working arrangement for security purposes is the deployment of 'market thugs' by Jakarta's police in September 2020 to enforce the wearing of (anti-Covid) facemasks in public (Firmansyah 2020) and, also, the involvement of BMI's Lapijan with whose quote the paper opened.
- [9] This dance troupe gained a good reputation and performed throughout Indonesia as well as abroad. A video of Mei Christy performing with Uyau Moris, a well-known Dayak musician, at the 2017 Indonesian Festival in Ottawa, Canada, can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9gSD7-DIXs>.
- [10] Examples given included provision of security for KKBP events and 'disciplining' some known wife-beaters.
- [11] Various copies of the video have been circulated and can be located on YouTube using 'masjid' and 'Tumoluntung' as search terms.
- [12] For instance, Maksum (2020) speaks of a 'radical Christian terrorist group that should be disbanded'.
- [13] In short, he explained that the Muslim community had been given a false permit by someone pretending to be the relevant official. As such they had assumed to be within their rights

whereas in fact they did not have the required permission. We were informed by a BMI member that MUI and BMI agreed beforehand on the permit being proposed. Leaders of the local chapter of Banser sat in on this conversation as well.

- [14] Claims about the size of FPI's membership range wildly. The number of seven million was claimed as early as 2014 (CNN Indonesia 2014), and estimates have gone up since then.
- [15] For FPI, these included the 2016 Defence of Islam Action (Aksi Bela Islam), which saw a coalition of FPI and other hardline groups mobilise hundreds of thousands of supporters in protests against alleged blasphemy by Jakarta Governor Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama.
- [16] Hizbut Tahrir had been officially banned in Indonesia in 2017 on the grounds that it was anti-Pancasila and strove for Indonesia to become an Islamic caliphate, which is incompatible with Pancasila's religious pluralism.
- [17] A video of the Tauhid flag burning in Garut, West Java, during the celebration of National Santri Day on 22 October 2018 can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdcWJqs1zFw>.
- [18] Other reasons included operating without a valid licence and links to terrorism (see Dharmastuti 2020).

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