Top of his class at the police academy, one-time head of Indonesia’s elite Densus 88 counter-terrorism squad, and former Jakarta police chief.

Few would argue that Commissioner General Tito Karnavian is not equipped to take the lead in Indonesia’s war on terror as head of its National Counter-terrorism Agency (BNPT).

The 51-year-old was appointed to the position in March this year. But his battle against terrorism started way back in 1999, when Indonesia’s then-Defence Minister faced an assassination attempt by an Islamist group.

He says: “Since then, I have been involved in investigating most of Indonesia’s terrorist cases. I really like the challenge and can feel the rush of adrenaline when dealing with challenging cases.”

“Thankfully, we have succeeded in solving most of these cases, tens of them. I strongly believe that our success can only be due to solid teamwork and blessings from God.”

General Karnavian has wasted no time setting goals in his new role. His main priority is neutralising the group in Poso, Sulawesi, led by Indonesia’s most wanted terrorist Santoso. He says: “This group is a symbol of open resistance to the government by theterrorist networks in Indonesia. Addressing this problem would reflect the effectiveness of the state in countering terrorism and demoralise the terrorist networks.”

He also hopes to prevent further terrorist attacks in Indonesia, such as the deadly bombings that shook Jakarta in January. As the city’s police chief then, General Karnavian led the hunt for the terror cells behind the attack which killed four civilians.
His work has been praised by the country’s National Police Commission. Its commissioner Edi Hasibuan told thejakartapost.com that General Karnavian is the right man to lead the BNPT: “We consider Tito an officer who has mastered terrorism issues. This can be seen in the way he handled the terrorist attack in Jakarta a couple of months ago.”

Counter-terrorism experts in the region have also described him as a thinking man’s warrior who complements a detailed knowledge of the terrorist landscape in Indonesia with first-hand operational experience fighting such radicals.

For instance, more than a decade ago, he led the assault on Islamist terrorists who had beheaded three Christian schoolgirls. After a one-day gunfight, he and his men “captured more than 100 people, seized thousands of rounds of ammunition and hundreds of guns and bombs”.

Eager to enrich his knowledge on the issue of terrorism and counter-terrorism, he also did a PhD in Strategic Studies at NTU’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), which aims to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Proving he is no slouch when it comes to academia, he graduated magna cum laude in 2013.

“The programme was so fruitful, valuable and fantastic. It sharpened my analytical abilities, and enabled me to build networks with world-class lecturers and experts in my field.”

But General Karnavian believes that terrorism cannot be tackled with brains and brawn alone. He explains: “People sometimes take things for granted. They may think that the threat is no longer there if no attack has occurred for a while.”

“We have to convince the public, media, our leaders, and many other parties that the problem remains. We have to share with them that it cannot be overcome by my agency alone, but requires a multi-party approach.”

He adds that international and regional cooperation are just as important in today’s environment of international terrorist networks which have Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria as “centres of gravity”.

“Such cooperation should focus on sharing intelligence, joint operations, containing the spread of radical ideology – particularly through the internet – and de-radicalisation. Of course, big powers must work together to neutralise those centres of gravity too.”

General Karnavian also places great importance on the process of rehabilitation, saying: “The radical mind-set of terrorists is shaped through a relatively long process involving inculcation and adoption of radical ideology.”

“Terrorist operations are just the tip of the iceberg of the radicalisation process and killing terrorists alone will not eliminate the threat. We must study this process and explore how to prevent people from being radicalised or rehabilitate them.”

He accepts the popular view that prisons can be an incubator of radicalism in Indonesia. “Terrorists who are inmates might have opportunities to interact with others and even plan an attack.”

“To deal with this issue, we categorise inmates into groups: hard-cores, operatives, supporters and sympathisers. The hard-cores – or those who are the most radical – must be sent to maximum security prisons where communication is restricted.”

On top of that, General Karnavian has the BNPT working closely with prison authorities to implement programmes of de-radicalisation targeting jailed terrorists and their families, which are then followed by a post-release programmes. Counselling teams comprising of the likes of police officers, psychologists and Islamic scholars are already in place.

He also plans to tap on the resources of the RSIS and its International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research – led by his PhD supervisor Dr Rohan Gunaratna, Professor of Security Studies – which conducts research, training, and outreach programs aimed at reducing the threat of politically-motivated violence.

“The Centre is second to none in this region. I have travelled to over 70 countries and visited many universities and think-tanks – it is exceptionally remarkable on the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism and has experts from many countries, including those facing terrorism-related problems.”

“It consistently monitors affairs in those countries and around the globe too, so I would visit the Centre if I need an accurate update of the global situation. By having a bigger picture of the landscape of terrorism and counter-terrorism, I can precisely analyse the dynamics of the terrorist threat in Indonesia. I can also pick up best practices used by other countries, and apply them there.”