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The Violent Fringes of Indonesia's Islam

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Southeast Asia

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The 12 October bombing in Bali that killed more than 180 people seemed to vindicate the claims of those who had been accusing the Indonesian authorities of deliberately ignoring the presence on Indonesian soil of Islamic terrorists connected with al-Qa'ida network. More sober voices commented that domestic power struggles, rather than international terrorism, might be responsible for this outrage. It was the largest, but by no means the first major bomb explosion in Indonesia.

Indonesia has seen many bomb explosions since the fall of Suharto in May 1998, and in many cases military personnel appear to be involved. There are also, however, a number of small but conspicuously violent radical Islamic movements that engage in jihad in such places as the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi or act as vigilante squads raiding nightclubs, discotheques, and other dens of inequity.¹ Surprisingly perhaps, several of these militias maintain close relations with factions in the military or political élite.

Laskar Jihad

The largest and best organized of the various Muslim militias – until it was suddenly disbanded in early October, only days before the Bali bombing – was the Laskar Jihad, which was established in response to the onset of civil war between Christians and Muslims in the Moluccas, in 2000.² Ideologically this movement is very close to the Saudi religious establishment. Its leader, Ja'far Umar Thalib, had studied with strict Salafi ulama in Saudi Arabia and Yemen and taken part in jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. After his return to Indonesia, he became one of the leading lights of the Indonesian Salafi movement, which promoted, Wahhabi style, an apolitical Islam based on a strictly literal reading of the Qur'an and *hadith*. Most members appeared to be students or university graduates and dropouts. Religious leadership is provided by young men, mostly of Arab descent like Ja'far himself, who have also studied with Arabian Salafi ulama.

Laskar Jihad had the visible support of elements in the police and armed forces. It moved thousands of fighters to Ambon and later to other conflict areas in Central Sulawesi, West Papua, and Aceh. In all these areas, a close cooperation with the Indonesian military, notably the Special Forces (Kopassus) developed.

Following 11 September, Laskar Jihad immediately took pains to distance itself from Usama bin Laden. Ja'far Umar Thalib declared that he had met Usama back in the 1980s when he fought in Afghanistan but did not consider him as a good Muslim. The Laskar Jihad website reproduced a fatwa by the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz bin Baz, in which Usama bin Laden was declared an erring sectarian and rebel, whose example no pious Muslim should follow.

In April 2002, the Laskar Jihad challenged a peace agreement between Ambonese Christians and Muslims that had been brokered by cabinet ministers. A Christian village was raided and part of its population massacred. Eyewitnesses claim that Laskar Jihad fighters carried out this raid jointly with a Kopassus unit. This time, Ja'far was detained and put on trial. While his trial was continuing, Ja'far announced in early October 2002 the disbanding of the Laskar Jihad and ordered his followers to return to their homes. These instructions were in most places obeyed with a surprising meekness.

Jemaah Islamiyah

The organization most often mentioned as a likely perpetrator of the Bali bomb massacre is the Jemaah Islamiyah, which has

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For fourteen years, Sungkar and Ba'asyir remained in Malaysia, living in a village with a circle of their closest disciples and traveling around delivering religious sermons. They were visited by radicals from Indonesia and other regions of Southeast Asia. After Suharto's fall, they returned to Indonesia. Sungkar died in Jakarta during his first return visit; Ba'asyir settled again in his *pesantren* at Ngruki near Solo. The establishment of the Majelis Mujahidin in August 2000 gave him a very public profile.

Other groups

There are a number of other, loosely connected and to some extent competing underground networks that continue the struggle for an Islamic state in Indonesia. They go by the old name of Darul Islam or alternatively NII/TII, abbreviations for Islamic State of Indonesia/Islamic Army of Indonesia. They are not known to have been involved in major violent incidents recently.

The Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Front of Defenders of Islam), with its members dressed in white flowing robes and white turbans, has been conspicuous in numerous demonstrations in Jakarta. They carried out numerous raids on bars, brothels, and nightclubs in Jakarta and the nearby hill districts, causing great material damage but few casualties. Their leader, Habib (Sayyid) Rizieq Shihab, also studied in Saudi Arabia and is a firm proponent of the application of the *shari'a* in public life. He appears to have excellent relations with members of the military and political élite. The Front is definitely the least ideologically motivated of the militant groups listed here, and it is believed that its successes in bringing demonstrators to the streets are primarily due to financial incentives. Not long after 12 October, Rizieq Shihab was arrested (for reasons apparently unrelated to the Bali bombing) and the Front was ordered to disband, which the members did without any sign of protest.

The ease with which FPI and Laskar Jihad could be disbanded once the military authorities really demanded so not only indicates the degree to which both have come under military influence but also reflects the fact that they accept the (secular) government of Indonesia as legitimate in principle – unlike the Majelis Mujahidin, which wishes to transform it into an Islamic state and has not been known to court military or civilian élite factions.

been described by some experts as the Southeast Asian branch of al-Qa'ida. Four alleged members of this network are often mentioned as its chief terrorists: Hambali, alias Ridwan Isamuddin, a West Javanese accused of masterminding the bombing of churches in 10 Indonesian cities at Christmas in 2000, and of taking part in a series of bombings in Manila in 2000 (still at large); Abdur Rahman al-Ghozi, an East Javanese, arrested in the Philippines in January 2002, who reportedly confessed to having taken part in the same bombings in Manila in 2000 and in preparations for attacks on US assets in Singapore; Muhammad Iqbal bin Abdurrahman, alias Abu Jibril, of Lombok, author of a book on the obligation for every Muslim to carry out jihad, and a recruiter for jihad in the Moluccas, has been detained in Malaysia since January 2002 and accused of acting as a financial conduit for al-Qa'ida; and Agus Dwikarna, who was arrested at Manila Airport in March 2002 when the authorities allegedly found a large amount of explosives in his luggage. Dwikarna is the commander of a Muslim militia, Jundullah, in his native province of South Sulawesi.

Abu Bakar Ba'asyir is alleged to be the spiritual leader of this network, although he cannot be directly linked to any of the incidents. All four men named above have an undeniable direct connection with him, however: al-Ghozi studied at his school, Abu Jibril paid a recent visit to the school and took part in the founding conference of a militant organization that chose Ba'asyir as its leader, and Dwikarna is a committee member of that same organization. Hambali is reported to have lived near Ba'asyir during part of the period the latter spent in Malaysia.

It is not entirely clear to what extent this Jemaah Islamiyah actually is a real organization with a well-defined membership and structure of authority. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir has not been afraid of openly proclaiming his admiration for Usama bin Laden, but he denies any direct contact with him. Ba'asyir is the *amir* or commander of a public association of radical Muslims, the Council of Jihad Fighters (Majelis Mujahidin), that was established in August 2002. This organization has a paramilitary wing, the Laskar Mujahidin, which has trained followers in guer-

rilla techniques and sent them to fight a jihad in the Moluccas. At least dozens, possibly a few hundred, of its members gained combat experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s; many more are likely to have fought in the southern Philippines.

The term Jemaah Islamiyah has been used repeatedly during the past twenty years by police authorities as the name for a loose network of radicals in which Ba'asyir, besides another preacher of Arab descent, Abdullah Sungkar, played a central role. They jointly led an Islamic boarding school near the town of Solo since the early 1970s, and they joined the underground Darul Islam movement opposing the Suharto regime and striving for an Islamic state.

They contributed to this movement ideas that they borrowed from the Egyptian Muslim Brothers (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun). The struggle for an Islamic state, according to these ideas, was a step-by-step process in which the activist had first to engage in moral self-improvement, then to be part of a 'family' (*usrah*) of like-minded people who guide, help, and control one another. These are steps towards the building of an Islamic community (*jama'ah islamiyah*), which in turn is a precondition for the establishment of an Islamic state. From their Islamic school near Solo, Ba'asyir and Sungkar set up a network of committed young Muslims, some of them quietist, some of them militants, all of them opposed to the Suharto regime, organized in 'families' that together were to constitute a true community of committed Muslims, a *jama'ah islamiyah*.

Facing arrest in the mid-1980s, Ba'asyir and Sungkar escaped to Malaysia. According to sources close to the Usrah movement, a Saudi recruiting officer visited Indonesia in 1984 or 1985 and identified Sungkar's and another Darul Islam-related group as the only firm and disciplined Islamic communities (*jama'ah*) capable of jihad. Both were offered financial support to send 50 fighters to Afghanistan. Sungkar found only four men willing to go, the other group eight men. The following year, slightly larger groups of volunteers were sent, and so it went on until 1989, when the Russians withdrew from Afghanistan. Henceforth, they sent their militants to the southern Philippines.

Notes

1. Martin van Bruinessen, 'Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia', *South East Asia Research* 10, no. 2 (2002): 117–54.
2. Noorhaidi Hasan, 'Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia', *Indonesia* 73 (2002): 145–69.

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