

# Contemporary Islamic Militant Movements in Indonesia\*

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It is probably almost a cliché to say that Indonesian Islam or Southeast Asian Islam in general is a distinctive Islam, having different social, cultural, political and religious expression compared with Islam in the Middle East or else where in the Islamic world. In fact, in the 1990s Indonesian or Southeast Asian Islam has been dubbed by leading international media such as *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines as “Islam with a smiling face.” Islam in the region has been generally regarded as a brand of peaceful and moderate Islam that does not have problem with modernity, democracy, human rights, gender equity and other tendencies of the modern world.

But following international events after tragic events of September 11, 2001, for some foreign observers as well international media, the face of Indonesian or Southeast Asian Islam has been undergoing significant changes. Now, increasingly Islam in the region is regarded as being under rapid process of radicalization with the rise of some militant Muslim groups; and worse still, the Muslim region of Southeast Asia is now perceived by some as a potential “hotbed of terrorism.” There are of course potentials of radicalism among Indonesian or Southeast Asian Muslims, but I would argue that it is too far to view that the region is a “hotbed of terrorism.”

## Radicalization of Militant Groups

Again, one however has to admit that the rapid political changes that have been taking place at the national, regional and international levels, especially after September 11, 2001 tragedy in the US, have indeed witnessed the rise of Muslim radicalism in the region. The arrest and trials of a number of individuals and groups in Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Indonesia for alleged involvement in terrorism has increasingly indicated that they have regional links with each other as well as with international terrorist groups.

The investigation of Indonesian police of the Bali bombings on October 12, 2002, for instance, so far seems to disclose the complex connections between militant individuals

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and groups that later also carry out violent and terrorist activities including Marriot and Kuningan bombings in Jakarta. A clearer picture of the radical networks appears. There are at least two conspicuous patterns uncovered from police investigation of the bombings. Firstly, some of the perpetrators of the bombings are alumni of the Ngruki Pesantren in Solo Central Java, the chief of which is Abu Bakar Baasyir, who is widely regarded as the spiritual leader of Jama'ah Islamiyyah, the core of radical groups in Southeast Asia. Secondly, some of the perpetrators had been living in Malaysia in the period of Abu Bakar Baasyir's self-exile, escaping President Soeharto's harsh measures. [Azra 2003b; ICG August 2002; ICG December 2002; Nursalim 2001].

The perception of the rise of radicalism among Indonesian or Southeast Asian Muslims appears rapidly after the September 11, 2001 events in New York and Washington DC. The perception grows stronger in the successive events in the aftermath of the "Nine-Eleven," especially the Bali bombings that left almost two hundred innocent people dead. The bombings at McDonald outlet and Haji Kalla car show room in Makasar, South Sulawesi, on the eve of 'Id al-Fitr (December 5, 2002), followed by Marriot Hotel bombing in Jakarta in 2003 and lastly at Kuningan or at the front of Australian Embassy in Jakarta recently (September 9, 2004), have furthermore confirmed the tendencies of terrorism among certain radical individuals and groups in Indonesia. This is due to the result of police investigation in Indonesia that shows that perpetrators of these terrorist acts are individuals that have been known to be members of certain radical persons and groups.

Again, there is little doubt that the September 11, 2001 attacks on US has rapidly radicalized certain individuals and groups among Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. The American military operation in Afghanistan following the attacks on World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon headquarter in Washington DC has unfortunately given momentum for the radicals to assert themselves more clearly. The Bush administration threat and subsequent attack against Iraq has further fueled bitter resentment among the radicals. Furthermore, the arrests of a number of suspected radicals in Malaysia, Singapore, and Philippines has added fuel to their anger and bitterness toward the US and symbols that they consider as representing American imperialist arrogance such as McDonald or Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets.

One should not be misled, however, with these current developments; in fact, radicalism among Indonesian Muslims in particular is not new. Southeast Asian Islam in general has been viewed as moderate and peaceful Islam, but the history of Islam in the region shows that radicalism among Muslims, as will be discussed shortly, has existed for at least two centuries. The Wahabi-like Padri movement, in West Sumatra in late eighteenth and early nineteenth held sway to force other Muslims in the area to subscribe to their literal understanding of Islam. The violent movement aimed at spreading the pure and pristine Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salaf*). The Padri, however, failed to gain support from majority of Muslims; and, as a result, the Padri movement was the only precedent of Salafi radicalism throughout Southeast Asia.

The Padri movement was a shift in the continued influence of Middle Eastern Islam on the course of Southeast Asian Islam. As I argued elsewhere [Azra 2004], from the sixteenth century up to the eighteenth century, Islam in the Middle East exerted very

strong influence on Islamic intellectualism and religious life in Southeast Asia, mainly through complex networks of Middle Eastern and Malay-Indonesian '*ulama*.' The Malay-Indonesian '*ulama*,' in turn, played a crucial role in the peaceful reforms of Islamic intellectualism and life in Southeast Asia. I should mention, however, that toward the end of the eighteenth century, the discourse on *jihad* (war) was introduced by such prominent Malay-Indonesian scholars as 'Abd al-Samad al-Palimbani and Daud ibn 'Abd Allah al-Patani as a response to the increased encroachment of European colonialism in Southeast Asia; the *jihad* was not directed against other Muslims, however. Therefore, it is the Padri of West Sumatra who set the precedence in Southeast Asia by launching the *jihad* against their fellow Muslims.

### **Politico-Religious Roots of Radicalism and Terrorism**

The root causes of radicalism among Muslims in the modern times are very complex. The complexity is even greater during the present time, because of many driving factors that are working to influence the socio-historical course of Muslim societies as a whole. In the past, before the modern period, the factors of radicalism were mainly internal, that is, as a response to internal problems that were faced by the Muslims such as the rapid decline of Muslim political entities and ensuing conflicts among Muslims. Many Muslims in the pre-colonial time strongly believed that the sorry situation of the Muslim world had a lot to do with the socio-moral decay of Muslims themselves resulting from their wrong religious belief and practices; according to this arguments, many Muslims had abandoned the original and real teachings of Islam.

As a result, some Muslims felt it necessary to conduct *tajdid* (renewal) or *islah* (reform) not only through peaceful means, but also by using force and other radical means they considered to be more effective, for instance, by declaring *jihad* (war) against Muslims who were regarded as having gone astray. Islam of course emphasizes the need for Muslims to renew their beliefs and practices; in fact, in one of his *hadith* (tradition), the prophet Muhammad states that there would be a reformer or renewer (*mujaddid*) of Islam, coming at the end of every century to renew and revitalize Islam. But at the same time, it is clear that Islam prohibits the use of radical and violent means in the efforts to renew and reform Islam.

One of the strongest tendencies in the discourses and movements in Islamic renewal and reforms is the orientation towards pure and pristine Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salafs*). That is why most of the Islamic renewal movements are called as "*Salafiyyah*" (or Salafi, or Salafism). There is a very wide spectrum of Islamic discourses and movements that can be included in Salafiyyah [ICG 2004; Jamhari & Jahroni 2004]. One can make a distinction of "classic Salafiyyah" and "neo-Salafiyyah"; or "peaceful Salafiyyah" and "radical Salafiyyah." The Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula that gained momentum in the late eighteenth century can be categorized as both classic and radical Salafiyyah. The case is also the same with the Padri movement in West Sumatra in the successive period as described briefly above. The Wahhabi-like Padri movement can be conveniently categorized as the "classic Salafism," in which the internal factor with the Muslim *ummah* was its driving force.

The spectrum of "neo Salafiyyah" discourses and movements is certainly very complex. The term "neo" in the first instance refers to the period of the modern period,

beginning with the harsh encounters between Muslim societies and Western colonial powers from the seventeenth century onwards. During this period, the external factors—associated mostly with the Western world—that could incite radicalism increasingly become more and more dominant. In fact, the West has been accused by many Muslims as being responsible for many problems that Muslims have been facing in the last several centuries. Confronting continued Western domination and hegemony, many Muslims were afflicted by a kind of defensive psychology that lead to, among others, the belief of the so-called “conspiracy theory.”

There were of course outbursts of Muslim radicalism in Southeast Asia in the period of the nineteenth and before World War II during the heyday of European colonialism in the region. They were a different kind of radicalism; they were in fact *jihads* to liberate Muslim lands (*dar al-Islam*) from the occupation of the hostile infidel European coming from the lands of war (*dar al-harb*). According to classical Islamic doctrines, *jihad* against hostile infidels is justified and, in fact, it is considered as just wars; the *jihads* of this kind are believed as wars in the way of God (*jihad fi sabil Allah*).

Looking at the whole history of radicalism among Muslims, I would argue that radicalism among Muslims is more political rather than religious. In some instances, the original motive could be religious, but soon becomes very political. Political developments in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia after World War II had been important factors of the rise of new kind of radicalism among Muslims. Disappointed with the Indonesian military policies of rationalization of paramilitary groups following Indonesian independence on August 17, 1945, Kartosuwirjo in the name of Islam rebelled against the government. This was the origin of the Dar al-Islam (DI, or Islamic State) or Negara Islam Indonesia (NII, Islamic State of Indonesia) and Indonesian Islamic Army (Tentara Islam Indonesia/TII) that aimed at establishing an Islamic state, *dawlah al-Islamiyyah*, in Indonesia. Even though the rebellious movement spread to South Sulawesi and Aceh in the 1950s, it failed to gain support from the majority of Indonesian Muslims, who after a bitter struggle in the last year of Japanese occupation had accepted Pancasila (five pillars) as the national ideology. As a result, the Indonesian army was able to crush these radical movements.

The idea of the establishment of Islamic state (*dawlah al-Islamiyyah*) is one of the most crucial issues that is on and off among certain groups of Muslims in Indonesia. Certain groups among the moderates, such as the Masjumi party under the leadership of Mohammad Natsir, for instance, also attempted to transform Indonesia into a *dawlah al-Islamiyyah*. It is important to point out that the attempts were carried out through legal and constitutional ways, more precisely, through parliament. But they failed to materialize the idea, mainly because Islamic parties had been involved in quarrels and conflicts among themselves and, therefore, failed to gain majority in national election of 1955, thus, also in the parliament.

It is important to note that with that failure, the moderate Muslim leaders had not resorted to illegal means, such as armed rebellion, to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. In contrast, there was growing tendency among them to accept Pancasila as final political reality. At the same time, however, there remain individual and Muslim groups who keep the idea of establishing an Islamic state Indonesia alive. Depending on political situation in certain times, these people can operate underground or openly in achieving

their goals. They may also collaborate with certain elements of unhappy military persons or even with other radical groups which, in terms of ideology, are incompatible with theirs; this awkward collaboration can be called as “marriage for convenience,” or in Islamic terms as “*nikah mut’ah*.” Therefore, one should be very careful in his/her analysis and perspective of radical groups; some of them could be genuine, motivated mostly by religious reason, but some others could be “engineered” radicals sponsored by certain individuals and groups of people for their own political ends.

The Soeharto New Order regime at least in the period of 1970s and 1980s was not on good terms with Muslim political forces in general. In fact there was a lot of mutual suspicion and hostilities between the two sides. President Soeharto took very harsh measures against any expression of Islamic extremism. But at the same time, it is widely believed that certain military generals such as Ali Murtopo and Benny Moerdani recruited ex DI/TII to form “Komando Jihad” (Jihad Command), conducting subversive activities in order to discredit Islam and Muslims [Ausop 2003].

### **Contemporary Muslim Radical Groups**

The fall of President Soeharto from his more than three decade long-held power, has unleashed the then idle Muslim radicals. The euphoria of newly-found democracy and lifting of the “anti-subversive law” by President BJ Habibie, have provided very good ground for the radicals to express their extremism and radical discourse and activities in a more visible manners. The lack of law enforcement because of demoralization of the police and military (TNI) has created some kind of legal vacuum that in turn has been used by the radical groups to take law into their own hands.

Some of the most important radical groups should be mentioned in this account. They are the Lasykar Jihad (LJ), formed by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlul-sunnah Wa al-Jamaah (FKAWJ) under the leadership of Ja’far Umar Thalib; the Front Pembela Islam (FPI/Islamic Defence Front) led by Habib Rizq Shihab; the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI/Council of Indonesian Jihad Fighters) led by Abu Bakar Baasyir; the Jamaah Ikhwan al-Muslimin Indonesia (JAMI) led by Habib Husein al-Habsyi; and the Hizb al-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI/Indonesian Party of Liberation) [Bamualim et al. 2001; Azra 2003a; Fananie et al. 2002]. It is important that some of these groups have been either disbanded by their own leaders—like the Lasykar Jihad—or have been idle or have been lying low after a number of arrests and trial of perpetrators of the Bali and Marriot Hotel bombings since the late 2002 as mentioned elsewhere in this paper.

It is clear that all of these radical groups are independent and have no connection with established organizations like the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and the like; nor are they affiliated with Islamic political parties. This indicates that all of the radical groups do not trust all other established Muslim organizations, both socio-religious and political in nature. This is mainly because in the view of these radical groups, established Muslim organizations are too accommodative and too compromising in their political and religious attitude vis-a-vis Indonesian political and religious realities. Political struggles and conflicts among fragmented political groups as well among the pro- and anti-status quo groups involving also circles in the Indonesian military (TNI) in the aftermath of President Soeharto’s fall, provide another impetus for the radical to asserts themselves.

I would suggest that there are at least two categories among these radical groups; the

first group is radical groups that are basically home-grown; this includes the Lasykar Jihad, FPI and some other smaller groups. Second group is Middle Eastern affiliated- or oriented groups, like the JAMI—which has its origin in al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun in Egypt—and Hibz al-Tahrir, which was initially founded in Jordan by Syaikh Taqi al-Din Nabhani in the 1950s. Despite this distinction, all of these radical groups have a very strong Middle Eastern oriented ideology which they believe as the most genuinely Islamic world-view. Therefore, in terms of religious outlook, they subscribe to the ideology of radical Salafism; and in terms of political view, they are believers in the ideology of *khilafa*sm which among their important aims is the establishment of a single, universal *khilafah* (caliphate) for all Muslims in the world.

Even though these radical groups aim to establish a *dawlah Islamiyah* of *khilafah* in the region, they are largely different from the old DI/NII movement in Indonesia. Due to conflicts and splits among the ex-DI/NII members resulting from Indonesian intelligence operation as mentioned above, the present radical groups tend to operate independently from older groups [Ausop 2003].

Looking at the whole phenomenon of radicalism among Muslims in Southeast Asia, or in Indonesia in particular, it is clear that it has a long and complex history. The history of radicalism among certain Muslim groups, furthermore, shows that there are many factors, which are responsible for the tendencies. There is strong tendency that the motives of their radicalism are political rather than religious. It is also conspicuous that their radicalism has a lot to do with the disruption of political and social systems as a whole. The absence or lack of law enforcement is certainly an important factor for the radicals to take laws into their own hands in the name of Islam.

### **Networks of the Radicals**

A series of terrorist bombings in Indonesia, beginning in Legian, Bali, on October 2002 followed by Marriot Hotel in Jakarta in 2003, and lastly at the front of Australian embassy in Jakarta (September 9, 2004), is certainly a sad human tragedy in contemporary Indonesia. In fact, the bombing reflects a new phase of violence and terror in the country. This can be seen not only in the relatively large number of the victims, but also in the use of lethal weapon by the terrorists to afflict the greatest psychological impacts both domestically and internationally. Worse still, there is suspicion that one of the perpetrators was a suicide bomber, reminding one of the Palestinian suicide bombers. It is difficult for Indonesian people in general that certain individuals among them are increasingly becoming so ruthless and inhumane.

But now, after intensive police investigation, the Bali, Marriot and Kuningan bombings, for several reasons, could be a “blessing a disguise.” First, police have been able not only to catch the alleged perpetrators of the bombing, but also to reveal some fresh evidence of the networks of the radicals in Indonesia and Southeast Asia in the general. The revelation of the networks has been crucial for establishing the fact that the networks of the radicals have been working in Southeast Asia, or in Indonesia in particular, in the last several years to achieve their ends, the most important of which is an “Islamic State of Nusantara” that would consist of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and, probably also the Muslim area of South Philippines [Azra 2003b].

A great deal of credits, then, must be given to the police who have been working

tirelessly to investigate the case and have been successful to uncover the links between one perpetrator and another. After unsolved series of bombings since the fall of President Soeharto from power in 1998, now the police with the help of their counterparts from Australia, for instance, have been able to uncover the links of the Bali blast, Marriot and Kuningan bombings with some other bombings in the country in the post-Soeharto period. It is unfortunate, however, that until now the alleged two actors of these series of bombings, Dr. Azahari and M. Nurdin Top (both are Malaysian citizens) are still at large.

Second, the revelation of the networks of the radicals by the police has silenced convincingly most of the skeptics, who from the very day of the Bali blast have maintained that the bombing was simply a US or Western plot to discredit Islam and destroy the image of Muslims in the country. "The skeptics," some of whom are prominent Muslim leaders, seem to believe in the so-called "conspiracy theory," and in fact had accused President Megawati government of having slavishly surrendered to the pressures and wishes of President Bush of the US in particular. This kind of accusation has also been put into air against Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) during Indonesian Presidential election of 2004; but it failed to gain any impact on the people, and SBY won the election.

The disclosure of the networks of the radicals now apparently shows that the "conspiracy theory" does not ring true. The statements of Amrozi, Imam Samudra and their accomplices, involved in the Bali and other bombings, make it clear that the bombings have been motivated by both "genuine" radicalism and hatred against the US and other Western powers. The fact that the perpetrators showed no remorse has further strengthened the view that they have been strongly motivated by their own violent ideology rather than by anything else.

Third, the revelation of the networks of the radical points to the fact that there are indeed terrorists among Indonesian Muslims who are more than happy to use violent means to achieve their ends. Before the police disclosure, there has been widespread reluctance among leaders of Indonesian Islam to admit that there are terrorists among Indonesian Muslims who have misused the teachings of Islam to justify their terrorist activities. In fact some of the prominent Muslim leaders have issued statements that could create a wrong impression in the public mind that they are not only defending the radicals but also condoning violence and terrorist acts.

### **Empowerment of the Moderate**

It is now the right time for Indonesia, or Southeast Asian Muslim leaders in general, the majority of whom are moderates, to sincerely admit that there is a serious problem of radicalism among certain Muslim individuals and groups. This problem should be fairly addressed by moderate Muslim leaders hand in hand with law enforcement agencies for the sake of the image of Islam as a peaceful religion and of Indonesian or Southeast Asian Muslims as the "Islamic people with a smiling face." The problems of the radicals are to be seen at two levels; first, the abuse and manipulation of certain Islamic doctrines to justify radicalism and terrorism. The abuse undoubtedly comes from literal interpretation of Islam. Second problem is the use of violence and terrorism, which undoubtedly runs contrary to Islam.

Therefore, it is high time for moderate Muslim leaders to speak more clearly and loudly that literal interpretation of Islam will only lead to extremism that is unacceptable to Islam, and that Islam can not condone, let alone justify, any kind of violent and terrorist act. There is absolutely no valid reason for any Muslim to conduct activities that harm or kill other people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Any kind of resentment and deprivation felt by any individual and group of Muslim cannot and must not justify any kind of desperate and inhuman act.

Furthermore, the moderate Muslim leaders should not be misled by the claims and assertion of the radicals. The radicals are shrewd not only in abusing Islamic doctrines for their own ends, but also in manipulating Muslim sentiment through the abuse and manipulation of mass media, particularly television. The claims that the arrest of certain radical leaders means the suppression of Islam and the '*ulama*' (Muslim religious scholars) are very misleading. Similarly, the claims that the police investigation in Indonesia of certain *pesantren* (Islamic traditional boarding school) in the search of the perpetrators of the bombings is the initial step of hostility and suspicion against the whole *pesantrens* are even more misleading.

The identification of radical leaders and groups with Islam and '*ulama*' is again very misleading. In fact the radicals are only a very small fraction of the ocean of moderate Muslims who from their sheer number can be fairly regarded as the representation of the peaceful nature of Indonesian or Southeast Asian Islam. Therefore, the moderate should be very careful not to support any impression that could lead to the identification of the radicals with Islam and Muslims at large.

Some have argued that the defensive attitude of certain moderate Muslim leaders, particularly in Indonesia, originates from the trauma of political engineering and abuses by the police and military of the Muslims during the Soeharto period. This argument, I believe, seems not to be relevant with Indonesian political situation in the post-Soeharto period. There is no evidence that the Megawati Soekarnoputri regime was hostile to Islam and Muslims. In fact President Megawati seemed to have been very sensitive to Muslim issues compared for instance to President Abdurrahman Wahid. Lacking Islamic credentials, President Megawati in fact prevented herself from making statements, let alone policies, that could spark opposition from Muslims in general. The case is seemingly also true with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who is very close to Muslim groups and in fact makes political alliances with Islamic parties like the Moon and Crescent Party (PBB) and the Justice Party (PKS).

But, there was of course a lot of criticism especially to President Megawati Soekarnoputri who was regarded to be very hesitant and indecisive to take any harsh measures against the radicals, because she was worried—it seems—of the possible backlash from Muslim public. It appears that she did not realize that the moderate Muslim leaders and organizations are more than willing to rally behind her in the opposition against any kind of religious extremism and radicalism. This had been made clear by statements of Hasyim Muzadi (national chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama/NU) and Syafii Maarif (national chairman of Muhammadiyah) since the aftermath of September 11, 2001 attacks in the US that Indonesian Islam can not accept any kind of religious extremism. Furthermore, the two largest Muslim organizations, representing some 70 million Indonesian Muslims, have reached an accord to tackle religious



radicalism through their various policies and programs.

As for the police force, now it becomes increasingly very difficult for them to practice human rights abuses such as in the past. The fall of authoritarian regime and the rise of democracy in Indonesia have forced police to be more sensitive to human rights issues and to the protection of the rights of the alleged perpetrators of any kind of violence and terrorism. But this does not suggest that the police are free from heavy-handedness and insensitivity. Therefore, it is the duty of the public to control and watch the police closely in their investigation in order not only to prevent possible wrongdoings and mishandlings of the suspected criminals by the police, but also to establish credible procedures and due process of law.

Therefore, moderate Muslim leaders while maintaining watchful eyes of the police efforts to bring to justice all perpetrators of violent and terrorist acts, should support police in their investigation. I suggest that one of the most important root causes of violence and terrorism in present day Indonesia is the almost absence of law enforcement and, worse still, impunity. In fact the vacuum of law enforcement and of decisive act of the police have been an important *raison d'être* for certain radical groups to take the law into their own hands through unlawful activities such as the raids on discotheques, nightclubs, and other places the radicals believe as the places of social ills.

Above all, the future of moderate and peaceful Indonesian Islam is much dependent on the fair, objective, pro-active attitude of the moderate majority to respond to any development of among Muslims in the region. The reactionary and defensive attitude is not going to help in the efforts to show to the world that Islam is a peaceful religion and that Muslims are peace loving people. Again, it is time for the moderate to be more assertive to lead the way to reestablish the peaceful nature of Indonesian or Asian Islam in general.

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