

Indonesian ambivalence

towards terrorism

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In the wake of the Bali bombing commemoration on 12 October, many Australians probably have the impression that most Indonesians share our distress at the tragic consequences of terrorism, and that they strongly support the US-led international campaign against terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah. This impression is largely due to the Australian media's focus on the responses of the predominantly Hindu Balinese, and on sympathetic comments by several senior Indonesian officials.

Images of grief-stricken Balinese dominated media portrayals of 'local reactions' and the press featured interviews with Balinese from various sections of society. Nearly all of those featured expressed dismay and anger at the terrible human and economic toll of the bombing and denounced the perpetrators.

A closer look at the public debate in Indonesia suggests, however, that Balinese responses may not fully represent those of the broader Indonesian community and that there are important differences between Australian and mainstream Indonesian reactions to the bombings. For example, few Australians would doubt that the Bali bombing was the work of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and that this group is centred in Indonesia and led by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. They would also accept that the US and Australian campaign against transnational terrorism targets violent extremists only and is not aimed at Islam per se or its law-abiding adherents.

By contrast, a majority of Indonesians appear not to believe that JI is an Indonesian organisation, nor are they convinced that the Bali bombers came from JI. This is hardly surprising given that most government officials and Islamic community leaders publicly assert that there is no evidence JI exists in Indonesia. The Minister of Religious Affairs, for example, instructed the media in August 2003 not to mention JI when referring to terrorists within Indonesia.

Most Indonesians were genuinely shocked, however, by the Bali bombings and do accept that terrorists are active in their country. But they seem to believe that JI operatives are recruited and commanded by outsiders. Many Indonesians are also very sceptical about the 'war on terror' and believe that the 'West' is using the international counter-terrorism issue to oppress Islam and keep Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, subservient to 'Western' strategic and economic interests.

Evidence of public scepticism about JI and the terrorism

issue can be found in opinion surveys. Shortly after the Bali bombing, 72 per cent of respondents to a Detik.com poll said that the CIA was responsible for the attack. In September of this year, a survey by the current affairs journal, *Gatra*, showed 52 per cent of those polled thought 'JI was a creation of the US'.

The comments of a wide range of prominent Islamic leaders are even more telling. Vice-president Hamzah Haz, who is also chairman of the second-largest Islamic party, has flatly asserted that JI exists in Singapore and Malaysia but not in Indonesia. He has also called President George W. Bush 'the king of terrorists'. Hamzah has a long record of provocative anti-Western remarks and captured headlines in September 2001 when he said the 9/11 attack was expiation for the United States' sins.

Of more concern to Western countries are the views of 'moderate' Muslim leaders such as Hasyim Muzadi, the chairman of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama. In September 2003, he declared that JI was part of a US strategy to 'force Islam into a corner' and he called on the Indonesian and foreign governments to refrain from mentioning Jemaah Islamiyah because of the unease this caused among Muslims. His statements on this matter are noteworthy because he is a well-known champion of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance, and he is a frequent visitor to Western countries (including Australia) where he is praised for his stand against Islamic extremism.

Solahuddin Wahid, a prominent human rights official and younger brother of former President Abdurrahman Wahid, stated that JI had been trained by the US and that foreign agencies were 'steering' the Indonesian police into blaming JI without adequate evidence.

Similarly, the deputy chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Muslim organisation, Dr Din Syamsuddin, claimed that JI was a foreign creation designed to 'stigmatise Islam' and make it easier to bend Indonesia to the will of the US. He believed the US had instructed 'its JI' to undertake the Marriott bombing as a way of justifying new measures against Islamic groups in Indonesia. These views were echoed by the head of the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals' Association (ICMI), who warned Muslims not to trust 'Western-engineered' reports on JI.

Part of the problem is the generic nature of the term Jemaah Islamiyah (literally 'Islamic congregation'). There are probably many thousands of 'Jemaah Islamiyah' across

Indonesia, nearly all of them informal and committed to peaceful religious activity. Thus, when Western leaders refer repeatedly to Jemaah Islamiyah, it is liable to be seen as a broader attack on Islam itself. As an analogy, Roman Catholic Australians would be uneasy if a terrorist movement called itself 'The Catholic Congregation' and government officials repeatedly condemned such an organisation. Whether by design or good fortune, the leaders of JI have chosen a name that arouses a strong defensive reaction in the Islamic community.

But there are other reasons for Indonesian scepticism on the terrorism and JI issues. Political expediency is undoubtedly a factor. Parliamentary and presidential elections will be held next year and Indonesian politicians are already jostling for advantage. In the case of Islamic parties, being seen to defend the Muslim community is a sure way to burnish their Islamic credentials in what is likely to be a closely fought election. President Megawati is also vulnerable on Islamic issues. Her Islamist rivals are keen to exploit the JI issue to portray Megawati as compliant to Western demands on terrorism and as not protecting Indonesia's Islamic community.

A further element is the strong sense in Indonesia that the world has become far more hostile in recent years. Suspicion of powerful Western nations and their perceived exploitative tendencies has long historical roots in the Indonesian national psyche. But this sentiment has intensified in last six years.

In 1997, Indonesia became the country most severely affected by the Asian financial crisis. Many Indonesians, both at the elite and the grassroots levels, laid blame for the crisis largely on the 'West' rather than home-grown structural, political and social problems. They believed that 'predatory' international financial markets had manipulated Indonesia's currency and that the prescriptions of Western-dominated multi-lateral agencies, such as the IMF, served to increase the country's vulnerability and suffering. The separation of East Timor in 1999 was also seen as the result of 'Western' (particularly Australian) interference in the province's affairs. Since then, some Indonesians have accused the 'West' of intervening in other trouble spots, such as the Muslim-Christian conflict in Maluku, and the separatist movements in Aceh and Papua.

All of these issues have created a sense of external threat more powerful than at any time since the early 1960s, when Indonesia challenged the formation of Malaysia as a 'neo-colonial plot' by Britain (and Australia). Many Indonesians now regard the world as a more hostile place, and believe that powerful forces have a vested interest in keeping Indonesia internally divided and biddable to Western dictates. Indeed, there is once again a proclivity to blame many of the country's present economic, political and security problems on external rather than internal factors.

These are the political, religious, economic and social contexts in which the terrorism issue should be placed. For many Indonesians, the US-led 'war on terror' is but the latest instance of the West pursuing a self-serving agenda under the guise of international cooperation and mutual benefit.

Indonesian government responses

Given the widespread ambivalence within Indonesian society regarding the terrorism issue, the Indonesian government's response to counter-terrorism has been surprisingly, indeed uncharacteristically, resolute. Immediately after the Bali bombings, it took the unprecedented step of allowing foreign police and intelligence agencies to join the Indonesian police in investigating the attacks. Two weeks later, new retrospective anti-terrorism laws were introduced that gave the police and judiciary special powers in tracking down and prosecuting suspected terrorists. These included the ability to use raw intelligence data in prosecuting alleged terrorists. Importantly, the government took the rare step of giving its unequivocal support to the police and courts in carrying out their tasks.

The speed and rigour of the investigation and trial process has surprised anyone familiar with Indonesia's corruption-ridden and inefficient legal system. Twenty of those charged with involvement in the Bali bombings have now been tried. All have been found guilty and three—Amrozi, Imam Samudra and Mukhlas—have been sentenced to death. It is doubtful that Australia's police and judicial system could have acted with such dispatch if faced with a case of this magnitude. At least another 30 JI members are in detention awaiting prosecution.

In contrast to its operational successes, the Megawati government has failed dismally to lead or nurture the public debate on Islamic extremism. The President had to be persuaded by her advisors to go to Bali the day after the bombings and she refused to act on offers from key mainstream Muslim leaders to help the government campaign against religious extremism. Indeed, she later declared that responsibility for combating Islamic militancy rested with the Islamic community, not the government.

Furthermore, few of Megawati's ministers have sought to engage in public discussion on terrorism-related issues, though in private, many are reportedly convinced of JI's centrality to the country's terrorism problem. A good example is the Co-ordinating Minister for Politics and Security, retired Lieutenant General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. On recent visits to Australia and the United States he spoke candidly about the challenge of terrorism, referring directly to JI. His comments to the Indonesia media, however, have been extremely cautious and have avoided naming JI. Even ministers with a good knowledge of Islam have failed to offer counter arguments to extremist Islamist doctrines. As a result, much of the burden of presenting information to the public and rebutting the extremist position has fallen to the police, and to leaders of Muslim socio-religious organisations such as NU's Hasyim Muzadi and Muhammadiyah's Syafii Maarif. Foreign funding has now made possible large-scale public information campaigns regarding moderate interpretations of the faith.

Australian responses

The sensitivity of the terrorism issue has obvious implications for Australian policy regarding Indonesia. The Australian government has stated that the Bali bombing has led to a new level of bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Australia. In a narrow sense, there is some justification for this judgement. The close working relationship established between the Australian Federal Police and the Indonesian police (Polri) is a development that few might have thought possible prior to October 2002. Polri has relied heavily on AFP technical expertise in forensic analysis and electronic surveillance of suspected terrorists. The capture of the senior JI figure, Imam Samudra, for example, was made possible by AFP officers tracking his mobile phone signal to a village in West Java. There are also extensive intelligence and defence exchanges between the two countries focusing on counter-terrorism.

Viewed more broadly, however, the bilateral relationship is strained. Anti-Australian sentiment (directed largely at the government rather than individual Australians in Indonesia) remains high. This is especially so within the country's political and diplomatic elite. In Jakarta, John Howard continues to be one of the most disliked foreign leaders and few of his senior ministers appear well-regarded by their counterparts in Jakarta. Some of this irritation with the Howard government is a legacy of Australia's role in East Timor in 1999 and the boatpeople crisis of 2001. Canberra's handling of the terrorism issue has, however, added to the tension. Key Indonesian officials see the Howard Government as pushy and at times insensitive on terrorism and related Islamic questions. They sense that Howard plays to his domestic audience rather than follows diplomatic protocols. Indonesian officials complain about learning of new Australian initiatives via the media rather than through diplomatic channels.

Moreover, Australia is often criticised in the Indonesian media for being too close to the US and as one of the countries engaged in undermining Indonesian unity and independence. No credible evidence is offered to support the latter proposition, but it remains a persistent and common belief among Indonesians.

For its part, the Howard Government has reason to be dissatisfied with aspects of Indonesia's anti-terrorism measures. The Megawati Government has been slow to act on flows of terrorist funds and has also been hesitant in implementing the UN-sanctioned ban on JI. The complexity of Australia's strategic relationship with Indonesia is highlighted by the simple fact that most Indonesian complaints about, and negative perceptions concerning, Australia are mirrored by similar frustrations and viewpoints in Australian political and official circles about Indonesia.

Both sides apparently feel there is too often a lack of gratitude and reciprocity in their cooperation.

Despite their frustrations, Australian leaders should continue to be circumspect in their public remarks on terrorism and Indonesian radical Islam. Mr Howard's own statements shortly after the 5 August Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta that JI had carried out the attack drew

sharp criticism from some Indonesian commentators. They asked how the Prime Minister could be so sure when the police investigation was only in its initial stages. They questioned Australia's motives in so quickly asserting that it was an 'Islamic' terrorist group that was responsible. In fact, many Indonesian officials and most Jakarta-based and foreign observers assumed that JI was responsible and said so soon after the bombing. Subsequent police investigations and research by the International Crisis Group have shown JI was indeed responsible.

Similarly, the Australian Federal Police commissioner, Mick Keelty, has spoken on several occasions of the need to address problems in the Islamic education system in Indonesia. Most scholars of JI regard Islamic education as a critical factor in the perpetuation of terrorism. This is, however, a highly sensitive issue in Indonesia. Most Islamic schools do not teach extremist versions of the faith and there are only a handful of schools with close links to JI. Commissioner Keelty's remarks carry the risk of being seen by many Indonesian Muslims as 'Christian meddling' in the affairs of their country. Hence, such statements can easily have a counterproductive effect on the broader fight against terrorism in Indonesia.

The terrorism issue will continue to dominate and complicate Australia-Indonesia relations for many years to come. Most scholars of JI believe that the organisation will remain a serious threat. There is some evidence that the children of current JI leaders are now being educated in schools noted for their militant jihadist teachings. It is also apparent that JI has an in-built capacity to evolve and adapt to changing security conditions. This will require ongoing bilateral co-operation in order to deal effectively with this threat.

Although Australian officials may be exasperated by what they see as the poorly informed public debate in Indonesia on JI and terrorism, they have little option but to accept that community opinion has an impact on the Megawati Government. In Indonesia's renascent democracy, no political leader can afford to ignore community sentiment even if it is uninformed or misguided. On the other hand, robust civil society will not flourish in Indonesia without genuine debate among Indonesians.

To win the campaign against transnational terrorism by Islamic extremists, both across the world and regionally, Australia needs to avoid actions that may deepen the scepticism and ambivalence towards the terrorism issue in the world's largest Muslim country. Hostile Indonesian public sentiment would be a severe setback for the campaign against terrorism, both regionally and generally. ♦

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