

Indonesia's Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam

Greg Barton

Reviewed by Tony LeRay-Meyer



Since 9/11 there has been a distinct genre of books seeking to provide an insight into the 'new terrorism'. Very few have been able to balance readability and the complex nature of the phenomenon and Greg Barton's *Indonesia's Struggle* is one of them. The book is an insightful and succinct analysis of the ideological origins of Jemaah Islamiyah and the nature of radical Islam in Indonesia. Barton argues that whilst the initial response to Jemaah Islamiyah (since Bali) has been adequate, there remains considerable potential for further extremist violence within Indonesia.

Barton is a senior lecturer in the School of Social and International Studies at Deakin University and a respected commentator on Indonesian political affairs. He recently authored a biography of the former Indonesian President, Abdurrahman Wahid. The depth of his understanding of the cultural, religious, and political aspects of Indonesian society is reflected in the well-argued approach he uses to tackle the complex subject of Jemaah Islamiyah. While he clearly synthesises the work of several other experts, he is much more successful than most at addressing the socio-cultural context of militancy and radical Islam in Indonesia.

Barton uses an easy story-telling style that avoids a common pitfall in the genre for complex detailing of names, locations and incidents. The book's readability will be appreciated by both the counter-terrorist practitioner and the general reader. He begins with a brief review of the Bali investigation, establishing the context of his analysis. Barton then develops an understanding of exactly what constitutes radical Islamism, arguing that understanding its Indonesian sub-context, is central to understanding Jemaah Islamiyah.

Based on his understanding of the group's antecedents and history, Barton's premise is that whilst there has been progress in responding to Jemaah Islamiyah since the Bali investigation, it has not been as effective as commonly assumed. As analysts began to look more closely at radical Islam in the region after 9/11 it became evident that Jemaah Islamiyah had been developing its militant pan-Islamic philosophy since 1982—under the guidance of its founders Abu Bakr Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar. Both had been involved with the Darul Islam movement that sought an Islamic state in Indonesia during the 1950s. A combination of events created the conditions for a radical Islamist movement to emerge, including the general repression of Islamic activism under Suharto, incidents such as the Tanjung Priok killings in 1984 (in which dozens of Islamic activists were killed by Indonesian troops), disenchantment

with the corruption of the Suharto regime and rising anti-Western sentiment.

Bashir and Sungkar developed a multi-dimensional network of militants that gained experience as Mujahideen in Afghanistan, established links with transnational entities such as the Jordanian group Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and were exposed to radical transnational Islamist factions such as al-Gama'at al-Islamiyah from Egypt. Barton outlines this evolution coherently and without unnecessary complexity.

The key to the entire book is the discussion in chapters 3 and 4 that moves beyond the history of Jemaah Islamiyah. Barton highlights two key contemporary developments that characterise the impact of Jemaah Islamiyah today. Drawing on the work of the International Crisis Group (ICG) he emphasises the importance of the 'Ngruki Network' of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in providing the basis for Jemaah Islamiyah's operational structure. The creation of the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) by Bashir in August 2000 provided a political structure aimed at uniting all radical Islamists and integrating Jihadi Islamism and radical political Islamism. Barton argues cogently that understanding the nature of both the Ngruki Network and the influence of MMI are essential in understanding Jemaah Islamiyah.

In the final chapter, Barton argues that the threat from radical Islamism transcends the threat from Jemaah Islamiyah. The influence of MMI in harnessing militant religious extremism through Jemaah Islamiyah and its network of affiliate organisations (such as Lashkar Jundullah), as well as increasing support from mainstream Islamist parties, is indicative of the broader threat posed in Indonesia from radical Islamism. Barton draws a comparison with Pakistan, in which militant minorities have steadily accrued undue influence over the ruling 'moderate' majority. Barton considers the key to any response is to recognise and understand the reality of radical Islamism in Indonesia—and one senses he is unconvinced that this has been achieved.

This book is a valuable contribution to understanding the phenomenon of radical and jihadi Islamism in Indonesia. Whilst it does not necessarily offer extensive or original research, the book's value is in the illustrative story it tells. This is a 'must read' for those seeking an insight into the actual threat from Islamism in our region. ♦

Greg Barton, *Indonesia's Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, Softback, 118pp., RRP \$16.95.