The Violent Fringes of Indonesia's Islam

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 looking the other way when signs of domestic soil of Islamic terrorists connected with al-Qa’ida network. More sober voices commented that domestic terror, 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 Sukharto in May 1998, and in many cases personal vendettas were involved. There are also, however, a number of small but consistently violent radical Islamic movements that engage in jihad in such places as the Moluccas, and of taking part in a series of bombings in Manila in 2000 (still at large), Abdur Rahman al-Ghoozi, an East Javaanese, 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 Iskandar bin Abdulrahman, alias Abid 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.

Laskar Jihad is 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. 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 apologetic Islam based on a strictly literal reading of the Quran and hadith. Most members appeared to be students or university graduates and dropouts. Religious leaders such as the 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 Ternate. The Front for the Freeing of Ambon and Ternate is organized around a network of radicals in which Ja’far’s students and followers, in the Moluccas, have been accused of acting as a financial conduit for al-Qa’ida. Four alleged members of this network are often mentioned as its chief terrorists: Hambali, al-Rawdan Iskandar, a West Javanese accused of masterminding the bombing of church in Jakarta in 1999 and in Ambon in 2000, and of taking part in a series of bombings in Manila in 2000 (still at large), Abdur Rahman al-Ghoozi, an East Javaanese, 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 Iskandar bin Abdulrahman, who was arrested at Manila Air-port 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 Barasyir 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-Ghoozi studied at his school, Abid Jibril paid a recent visit to the school and took part in the founding conference of a militant organization that chose Barasyir as its leader, and Dwikarna is a committee member of that same organization. Hambali is reported to have lived near Barasyir during part of the period the latter spent in Malaysia.

It is not entirely clear to what extent this Jemaah Islamiyah organization is a real organization with a well-defined membership and structure of authority. Abu Bakar Barasyir has not been afraid of openly proclaiming his admiration for Usama bin Laden, but he denies any direct contact with him. Barasyir is the omir or commander of a public associ-ation of radical Muslims, the Council of Councils of Islamic Communities, established in August in 2002. This organization has a parliamentary wing, the Laskar Mujahidin, which has trained followers in guerrilla 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.

Abu Bakar Barasyir has been accused repeatedly during the past twenty years by police authorities as the name for a loose network of radicals in which Barasyir, 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达尔盖hajimovement 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’ (u’rah) of like-minded people who guide, help, and control one another. These are steps towards the building of an Islamic community (jumarih islamiyah), which in turn is a precondition for the establishment of an Islamic state. From their Islamic school near Solo, Barasyir and Sungkar set up a network of committed young Muslims, some of them quiescent, 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 jumarih islamiyah.

Facing arrest in the mid-1980s, Barasyir and Sungkar escaped to Malaysia. According to sources close to the Urah 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 community (jumarih) 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 larg-er groups of volunteers were sent, and so went on until 1989, when the Russians withdrew from Afghanistan. Henceforth, they sent their militants to the southern Philip- pines.

For fourteen years, Sungkar and Barasyir remained in Malaysia, living in a village with a circle of their closest disciples and travel-ring 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 was arrested and imprisoned, while Barasyir returned visit, Barasyir settled again in his pe- ni tent at Ngurah near Solo. The establish-ment of the Majelis Mujahidin in August 2002 gave him a very public profile.

Other groups

There are a number of other, loosely con-nected and to some extent competing un-deground networks that continue the struggle for an Islamic state in Indonesia. They go by the old name of Darul Islam or al-ternatively MI/TBR, abbreviations for Islamic State of Indonesia/Islamic Army of Indone-sia. They are not known to have been in-volved in major violent incidents recently.

The Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Front of De-fenders of Islam), with its members dressed in white flowing robes and white turbans, has been conspicuous in numerous demonstr-a-tions in Jakarta. They carried out numero-us raids on bars, brothels, and nightclubs in Jakarta and the nearby hill districts, caus-ing great material damage but few casual-ties. The leader, Habib Sayyid Dihardjo, has also studied in Saudi Arabia and is a firm proponent of the application of the sharia in public life. He appears to have ex-cellent relations with members of the mili-tary and political elite. The Front is definite-ly 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 said to be disbanded, which the members did without any sign of protest.

The ease with which FPI and Laskar Jihad could be disbanded once the military au-thorities really demanded so not only indi-cates the degree to which both have come under military influence but also reflects the fact that they act as the local or regional govern-ment of Indonesia as legitimate in principle – unlike the Majelis Mujahidin, which wishes to transform into it an Islamic state and has not been known to court military or civilian elite factions.

Notes


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