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AFTER BALI, WILL INDONESIA ACT?

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The Bali bomb blasts which killed almost 200 foreign tourist and Indonesians on 12 October brought home to Indonesians the impact of such terrorist acts on tourism, domestic society and the economy. While investigations are in progress, there is strong circumstantial evidence that Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) extremists were responsible for the attacks. Earlier, the Indonesian authorities were reluctant to act against JI because it would be interpreted as a return to Soeharto's authoritarian government.

Opponents of President Megawati Soekarnoputri saw any action against Muslim groups as an attempt by her secular nationalist government to undermine the legitimate desire of Islamic political groups for greater Islamic influence on Indonesia's government. With the support of rogue elements of the Indonesian armed forces, the Laskar Pembela Islam attacked nightclubs and pubs in Java, Laskar Jihad provided weapons and organized its members to travel from Java to Maluku and Central Sulawesi to incite Christian/Muslim violence and the Laskar Mujahidin Indonesia recruited supporters, engaged in para-military training and distributed hate literature targeted at moderate Muslim activists, domestic Christians, Americans and other Westerners, without intervention by Indonesia's traditionally efficient security authorities.

Since Bali, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has been declared a terrorist organization by Indonesia although two weeks ago, Coordinating Minister of Political and Security Affairs, General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had denied that JI was active in Indonesia. Abu Bakar Bashir, whom Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines had earlier identified as the emir of JI, has finally been detained. The Indonesian government appeared reluctant to take him into custody while his supporters surrounded him as he lay in his hospital bed in Solo and met well wishers and the domestic and international media. Laskar Jihad has announced that it is being disbanded and its members have staged highly publicized departures from Maluku.

The puzzle for outsiders was why the Indonesian government was reluctant to act against marginal Islamic extremist groups undermining its authority and challenging its writ. Under Soeharto, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) were regarded as the protector of a secularist Pancasila state and it would immediately respond harshly to any threats to its political authority. However, the myth that the TNI is a monolithic entity able to exercise authority in a professional manner over Indonesia's sprawling archipelago has been badly battered by today's unfettered domestic press, looking for exposes to win subscribers and improve sales.

The competing roles played by the different agencies in the Bali bombing investigation highlights the decline in the cohesion of the TNI and the lack of a coordinated response by the Indonesian government. At different times, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the Police chief Da'i Bachtiar, National Intelligence Agency (BIN) chief Hendropriyono and

TNI chief General Endriartono Sutarto have sought to take the leadership of the investigation. While the police are now separate from the military and are responsible for criminal investigations, they lack the intelligence-gathering capability. Although Hendropriyono has been appointed by President Megawati to coordinate intelligence, Muslim groups view him with suspicion.

Today, the TNI appears as deeply fractured as any other grouping in Indonesian society. The TNI is now represented by many more santri within its senior ranks. This was a result of recruitment policies in the officer corps during Soeharto's New Order when there was a conscious effort to draw talent from throughout the archipelago. It also reflects the abnormal situation in the 1970s and 1980s when there was a paucity of santri officers in command positions as most santri officers had participated in the Dar-ul Islam and regional revolts of the 1950s. The decline in central government funding following the 1997-1998 economic crisis and the rise of regional autonomy has resulted in more rapacious behaviour by local TNI units and support for local movements, even if they are directed against central government interests. Claims of support by TNI elements for acts of political violence by extremist Islamic groups are therefore more credible than generally recognized.

A second part of the puzzle was why the Indonesian government was unwilling to act against Muslim extremists despite credible information from regional governments. These governments thought that it would be in the interest of the Indonesian government to act against individuals and groups planning terrorist activities.

The regional perception was that since independence, the Indonesian government was dominated by abangan (nominal Muslims), exemplified by Soekarno and Soeharto, who saw the political demands of the santri (devout Muslims) for the establishment of an Islamic state as undermining the 1945 Constitution and threatening the heterogeneous character of the Indonesian state with its mélange of religious, ethnic and language groups. While successive Indonesian governments supported the religious concerns of the Muslim community, there were no substantive concessions to the political demands of Islamic political groups.

Such perceptions failed to recognize the shift in the past decade towards greater public and private practice of the Islamic faith in Indonesia, a process that could be described as the santri-ization of Indonesian society. Increased religious identification reflected wider trends in the region where there was growing awareness of Islam's global identity. Compared to thirty years ago, there is considerable support for the Palestinian cause. Muslim groups were also able to secure significant support for the struggles of Muslims in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya. Although the Indonesian Government backed the Philippine and Thai governments against Islamic separatist movements, popular support for the insurgents exists at the ground level.

Increased santri influence also arose from Soeharto's efforts to seek new sources of support following Soeharto's estrangement from senior leaders of the Indonesian armed forces in the late 1980s. The establishment of the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) in December 1990 with Soeharto as its patron and Minister of Research and Technology B.J. Habibie as its chairman highlighted Soeharto's overtures to the Muslim community. Habibie's ascent to the Indonesian Presidency, following Soeharto's resignation in the aftermath of the anti-Chinese riots in May 1998, paved the way for the appointment of leading Muslim political activists to key positions in Habibie's administration.

The Islamic political parties played a critical role in blocking approval of Habibie's accountability statement to the Indonesian People's Representative Assembly (MPR) in 1999, leading to his decision not to seek re-election. They prevented the resulting election of Megawati Soekarnoputri, although her party had won the largest percentage

of votes at the 1999 general elections, through their support for Abdurrachman Wahid. When Wahid adopted secularist policies in government and alienated support through his mercurial behaviour, the Muslim parties withdrew their objections to Megawati as a woman president and helped to secure her election in October 2000. This led to a growing belief in Indonesia that the support of Islamic religious parties was crucial to winning the presidential elections.

However, although 88% of Indonesia's population identifies itself as Muslim, the total vote obtained by Islamic parties in all general elections since 1955 has never exceeded 43.5% of the votes cast. Despite recurrent attempts to seek the adoption of sharia law in Indonesia since 1945, there has been declining support in Parliament whenever the issue has been raised again. The latest attempt in 2001 was opposed by the two largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.

Moderate views dominate Indonesian Islam. But an unwillingness to challenge the more doctrinaire views of religious extremists has allowed extremists to shape the public debate in Indonesia. In the aftermath of 11 September, the moderate-dominated Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) issued one of the harshest international criticisms of the United States. On 25 September 2001, MUI called on Muslims in the world to 'fight in the path of Allah' (jihad fii sabillah) should the US and its allies commit aggression against Afghanistan and the Islamic world. If the United States proceeds with the anticipated attack on Iraq, Indonesia's Muslim leaders can be expected to call for a righteous response to American aggression.

The political leadership in Jakarta is focused on the forthcoming elections in 2004. If Megawati's PDI-P and Golkar remain deadlocked while emerging as the largest parties, the swing role of the major Islamic parties will be crucial in determining the outcome of the presidential elections. Key politicians such as Megawati, Hamzah Haz, Jusuf Kalla, Akbar Tanjung and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono have political ambitions. They will be tracking the responses of the major Muslim leaders. Vision and character are demanded of the moderate leaders of Indonesia's major Islamic parties. However, the moderate Muslim leaders are likely to take the easier path of seeking the support of extremist militants by avoiding criticism of their activities. Despite the initial flurry of activity after the Bali bombings, we should not anticipate any sustained campaign to eradicate the cells of radical Islamic terrorists in Indonesia.

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