

The Political Origins of Jemaah Islamiyah

Behind the Bali Bombings

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This carefully researched review article, originally published in November 2003 shortly after the October 2002 Bali Bombing sheds light on the historical origins of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Of particular significance is the role of the JI in the Soviet-Afghan war and its relationship to US, Indonesian and Pakistani intelligence.

JI was held responsible for the October 2002 Bali bombings. Recent press reports alledge that JI was also responsible for the October 1, 2005 Bali bombing, which led to the death of more than 20 people in the resort areas of Kuta and Jimbaran.

Part 1

If asked the question: "What is Jemaah Islamiyah?" just 18 months ago, most people would have been unable to reply. But since the Bali bombings in October 2002, "JI" has become a virtual household word, synonymous with Islamic extremism and terrorist violence throughout South East Asia. Despite its notoriety, however, almost nothing of any genuine substance has been written on the organisation.

During the past year, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has seized on JI's alleged activities as further justification of his support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and the US-led occupation of Iraq. JI has also become the pretext for the renewal of Australia's neo-colonial ambitions within the South Pacific region and for the Howard government's assault on democratic rights and civil liberties at home.

The Australian media, particularly Murdoch's publications, have deliberately worked to create a climate of fear, suspicion and uncertainty in the aftermath of the Bali attack. Coverage of the investigation and trials has been uniformly sensationalist and at times openly racist. Warnings of new "terrorist" plots and threats are constantly made, drawn largely from uncorroborated and unnamed police and intelligence sources.

In Indonesia a different, though no less distorted, view of JI prevails. There is widespread and entirely legitimate opposition to the US-led wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, many people are deeply concerned that, in the name of fighting JI, the military is reasserting its authority while fundamental democratic rights are being undermined—with the open backing of Washington and Canberra.

As a result, ordinary Indonesians are deeply suspicious of US and Australian motives, highly

critical of the claims being made about JI and willing to believe conspiracy theories about the Bali bombings and other terrorist atrocities. Such sentiments are compounded by the nebulous character of JI, an organisation that issues no statements, publishes no documents and has never formulated a political program.

Even the name “Jemaah Islamiyah,” meaning “Islamic Community,” evokes controversy. An attack on JI can be taken as an attack on the majority of the Indonesian population. Blaming JI for Bali would be, for many, like accusing the “Christian Community” in the US of the Oklahoma bombing or the “Hindu Community” in India for the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque. This is why, according to International Crisis Group (ICG) analyst Sidney Jones “Less than half of the Indonesian population is willing to believe that JI even exists.”

Jemaah Islamiyah, however, certainly does exist. There is ample evidence from a variety of sources that JI was formally established in the early 1990s by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir during their exile in Malaysia. It is closely connected to a small number of Islamic extremist schools in Indonesia, most notably, Bashir’s school at the village of Ngruki near Solo in Central Java. Thus JI is sometimes referred to as the Ngruki network.

Notwithstanding their politically motivated and legally flawed character, the Bali court cases have revealed that JI was definitely involved. The four men who have so far been convicted have had lengthy associations with the organisation. One turned state’s evidence, admitted his involvement and expressed remorse. The other three, while retracting their original statements, nevertheless acknowledged playing some part in the bombings and openly applauded the horrific results.

Most of the allegations about JI’s terrorist activities have never been tested in court. Their source is some 200 “JI suspects” being detained in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Many of these men have been held for months—and even years—without trial, in flagrant breach of their basic democratic and legal rights. In some cases, the information has been extracted through psychological and physical torture. As a consequence, a lot of it is so tainted it would be thrown out as inadmissible in most courts.

The media’s incessant focus on JI’s terrorist methods serves to confuse the essential questions. Historically, a wide and disparate array of organisations and groups, with wildly differing objectives, have resorted to terrorism. Like them, Jemaah Islamiyah has a definite political perspective. Only by examining its origins, history and outlook can one understand why it has emerged, what interests it serves and to whom it makes its appeal.

A deeply reactionary political tendency

The undeniable ideological leaders of JI have been Bashir and, before his death in 1999, Sungkar. While publishing no formal political documents, the two men spent decades elaborating a reactionary fundamentalist outlook that justified violent attacks on “enemies” of Islam.

Immediately striking are the ideological parallels between JI and its declared mortal enemy—the current US administration. Making the obvious terminological allowances, the ignorant and backward view of the world used by Bashir and Sungkar to justify their “defence of Islam” through acts of terror is remarkably similar to the outlook of Bush and his fellow gangsters in the White House.

In the name of defending “civilisation” against an “axis of evil,” Bush has enunciated a doctrine of “preemptive strikes” and launched illegal military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Likewise Bashir and Sungkar proclaim an irreconcilable conflict between “good” and “evil”—between the “followers of Allah” and the “followers of Satan”—to justify “jihad” [literally, struggle] in defence of the world’s Muslims.

Like religious fanatics everywhere, JI ascribes every social problem to immorality. Unemployment, poverty, inflation, high taxes, poor crops and generalised social chaos are all put down to loose sexual morals, the consumption of alcohol, hedonism, inappropriate dress and the failure to work hard and pray five times a day in the direction of Mecca. Such a list, *mutatis mutandis*, would not be out of place in a gathering of rightwing Christian fundamentalists in the US—the social base of the Bush administration. Likewise, JI’s solution to these social ills—the imposition of sharia [Islamic] law with its barbaric punishments—has much in common with the demands of the US rightwing for law-and-order, “family values” and state executions.

New Zealand academic Tim Behrend summed up Bashir’s teachings: “With the exception of his ideas of Islamic moral and civilisational superiority and racially tainted theories of international politics, the preponderance of Bashir’s teachings are eminently moral... For Bashir, the current environment is far too permissive in general, and fatally flawed by its establishment on *kafir* principles, including popular democracy, a usurious banking system, social equality of the sexes, and licensing of immoral (and culturally unacceptable) behaviour for economic gain” [*Reading Past the Myth: The Public Teachings of Abu Bakar Bashir*, February 2003, p.7].

In 1999, following their return to Indonesia from exile, Bashir and Sungkar issued a tract entitled “The Latest Indonesian Crisis: Causes and Solutions”. Couched in crude anti-Semitic and racist terms, and directed against “Kaffir Dutch,” “Mushrik Japanese,” and “Kaffir Chinese and Christians,” it blamed the last century of oppression in Indonesia on the lack of an Islamic state. All the evils that flowed from the Asian financial crisis were “a form of Kufr [punishment] due to our neglect of the blessings of Allah.” No accommodation with the existing state of affairs was possible. There were just two alternatives for any Muslim: life in an Islamic state implementing the sharia, or death striving to achieve it.

Such views are not merely quaint or eccentric, but deeply reactionary in the strict scientific meaning of the word. JI is irreconcilably hostile to the secular state and to basic democratic rights. Its ideal is a throwback to a largely mythological past, in which feudalistic social relations—between master and servant; cleric and congregation, and husband and wife—are governed by a fixed, preordained and unchallengeable social code, justified by religion and backed by brutal retributive punishment.

In no sense does JI defend or represent the interests of the working class and oppressed masses. Its program and perspective articulate the economic and social aspirations of a backward layer of the Indonesian capitalist class, which regards Islam as a useful tool for gaining access to the privileges and profits it feels it has been denied. At the same time, it promotes communalism and religious bigotry in order to keep working people ignorant and divided, thus preventing any challenge from below.

Part 2

In twenty-first century Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah is the most extreme expression of a rightwing Islamist current that traces its roots to the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of returning to a purified Islam—the religion of the prophet and his followers—first emerged in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century. It was later transplanted to Indonesia as the response of a section of the emerging bourgeoisie to colonial domination. What became known as “Modernist Islam” eclectically combined a religious revival with an attempt to incorporate advances in modern science and technology.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Modernist Islam was a diffuse anti-colonial movement that attracted both workers and layers of the urban middle class. It made little headway in rural areas, where the majority continued to adhere to a hybrid form of Islam, including elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and animism. Its more progressive elements were drawn, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, to the emerging nationalist movement and to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

By the time of World War II, Modernist Islam had been reduced to a rightwing rump, with a base among the more conservative elements of the urban petty bourgeoisie. These social layers felt oppressed by Indonesia’s Dutch colonial rulers and bitter about the privileged positions of Javanese aristocrats and Chinese entrepreneurs. At the same time, they were deeply hostile to the PKI and the threat posed by the emerging working class.

After the war, Masyumi, an organisation formed under the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, emerged as the main Modernist Islam party. It was antagonistic both to the PKI and to President Sukarno, a secular nationalist who had opposed the attempts of various Islamic parties and organisations to include sharia law in the country’s constitution. Masyumi’s opposition intensified as Sukarno increasingly turned to the PKI to control growing discontent among the masses, while manoeuvring with the Stalinist regime in Beijing to gain political and financial support. After some of its leaders participated in a short-lived CIA-backed rebel government on the island of Sumatra in 1958-59, Masyumi was banned.

In the 1940s, Masyumi politician-turned-cleric S.M. Kartosuwirjo founded the Darul Islam movement, the most extreme opponents of Sukarno. In August 1949, Kartosuwirjo proclaimed his own Indonesian Islamic State (NII) in opposition to the newly formed Indonesian Republic headed by Sukarno, linking up with regional revolts in Aceh and South Sulawesi. Darul Islam militia fought a long-running war of attrition against Jakarta in which an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people died. The rebellion was only finally crushed in 1962, following the capture and execution of Kartosuwirjo.

All the Islamic organisations, including Masyumi and the underground remnants of Darul Islam, enthusiastically backed the CIA-orchestrated coup in 1965-66 that installed the Suharto dictatorship, and participated in the subsequent massacre of an estimated 500,000 PKI members, workers and villagers. Darul Islam veterans were reportedly directly involved in the murder of estate workers in the Subang district of West Java.

According to Dutch academic Martin van Bruinessen: “It is widely believed that the powerful intelligence chief Ali Murtopo—who became Suharto’s chief adviser in his first decade as president, and who is rightly considered as the real architect of Indonesia’s New Order—cultivated a group of Darul Islam veterans and allowed them to maintain a network of contacts as a secret weapon against ‘communism’ and other enemies, that could be unleashed at any convenient moment” [*Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in post-Suharto*

Indonesia, July 2002, p.7].

Although Suharto exploited the services of the Islamic parties to come to power, he was not about to implement their demands for sharia law, or cede significant economic and political power to the narrow social layers they represented. Like his predecessor, Suharto was the political instrument of dominant sections of the Indonesian bourgeoisie who backed the military junta as the means for crushing radicalised layers of the working class and peasantry, which Sukarno had proven incapable of controlling.

Suharto's refusal to implement Masyumi's demands provoked two main responses. Some of Masyumi's leaders and sections of its associated student group—the Muslim Student's Association (HMI)—openly joined Golkar, the junta's political instrument, in line with their support for Suharto's anti-communism. But others continued to insist on establishing an Islamic state, and they turned in other directions.

The most prominent of this group formed the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), ostensibly devoted to Islamic proselytising rather than to politics. DDII oriented towards the Middle East and found both ideological and financial support in Saudi Arabia. In 1962, the Saudi regime established the Islamic World League as a vehicle for its own brand of Islamic fundamentalism—Wahhabism—to prop up its autocratic state against the impact of radical bourgeois nationalism. The DDII became the League's main partner in Indonesia, and former Masyumi leader Mohammad Natsir one of its vice-chairmen.

Sungkar and Bashir

Sungkar and Bashir were two of the more extreme elements associated with Masyumi/DDII. They drew their inspiration from the Darul Islam rebellion and both had strong links to Modernist Islam. Both men were born in Java in the 1930s and educated in Modernist schools. In the 1950s, they became leaders in Gerakan Pemuda Islam Indonesia (GPII)—a student group connected to Masyumi. Sungkar and Bashir met and began collaborating in 1963.

For obvious reasons, the two men remained cautious about publicly admitting their connections to the underground movement. But there is no doubt they were in contact with Darul Islam and supported its militant armed struggle for an Islamic state. In a 1997 interview with the Australian-based Islamic student magazine *Nida'ul Islam*, Sungkar hailed Kartosuwirjo, directly traced JI's origins to Darul Islam and proclaimed jihad, including Quwwatul Musallaha (military strength), as central to his organisation's struggle against the Suharto regime.

Following the 1965-66 coup, Sungkar, who was chairman of the DDII Central Java branch, and Bashir began openly campaigning for an Islamic state. The two established a radio station in Solo in 1967 and an Islamic school in 1971, which moved to its present location in the village of Ngruki two years later. They increasingly ran foul of the Suharto junta for their refusal to acknowledge the secular state and its ideology of Pancasila (literally, five principles: Belief in God, Justice, Nationalism, Democracy, Social Justice).

The internal security apparatus shut down the radio station in 1975 for its anti-government propaganda. In 1977 Sungkar was detained for six weeks for urging people not to vote in national elections.

Both Sungkar and Bashir were arrested in November 1978 and charged over their connections to Haji Ismail Pranoto—a senior Darul Islam commander in West Java—and an armed group variously described in court as Komando Jihad or Jemaah Islamiyah. The whole affair underscored the degree to which the US-backed Suharto junta was able to manipulate rightwing Islamic groups for its own purposes. Whatever their differences with Suharto and the military, these religious extremists shared an organic class hostility to the working class and to anything remotely associated with socialism and Marxism—even in the politically degenerate form of the Stalinist PKI.

By the late 1970s, Suharto and the military were increasingly concerned about rightwing Islamic organisations becoming a channel for political opposition. According to an International Crisis Group (ICG) report, intelligence chief Murtopo conceived of an elaborate sting operation using his contacts with the Darul Islam movement. The intelligence agency BAKIN actively encouraged the formation of an armed militia—Komando Jihad—claiming it was necessary to combat the dangers of a communist revival following the US defeat in Vietnam in 1975. Its real purpose, however, was to identify and trap Islamic militants and to politically discredit Islamic political parties and organisations.

In mid-1979, the security apparatus rounded up some 185 people, including alleged Komando Jihad leaders—Pranoto and Haji Danu Mohamad Hasan. The latter blurted out in court that he had been recruited by BAKIN. He claimed the army had instructed him to call upon former Darul Islam members to counter the communist threat. Sungkar and Bashir, who were detained the following year, appear to have been among those netted in Murtopo’s operation. Sungkar admitted in court to meeting Pranoto, but denied taking any oath to Darul Islam. Pranoto was never brought before the court and the government’s case rested almost entirely on public anti-government statements made by Sungkar and Bashir.

The exact nature of their activities at this time remains vague, as does the organisation to which they belonged. As the ICG explained: “At the end of 1979, it remained unclear whether Jemaah Islamiyah was a construct of the government, a revival of Darul Islam, an amorphous gathering of like-minded Muslims or a structured organisation led by Sungkar and Bashir. To some extent, it was all of the above, and the name seems to have meant different things to different people” [*Al Qaeda in South East Asia: the case of the ‘Ngruki Network’ in Indonesia*, August 2002, p.8].

Bashir and Sungkar were found guilty and sentenced to nine years jail. But they were released in 1982, less than three years later, after the term was reduced on appeal. In 1985, when Indonesia’s Supreme Court overturned the appeals court decision and reimposed the original sentence, the two fled into exile in Malaysia, where they remained until 1999.

The CIA’s anti-Soviet jihad

Sungkar and Bashir might have remained just two more aging Indonesian exiles, fulminating and plotting against Suharto, were it not for the activities of the Reagan administration in Washington. The CIA was just about to intensify its largest ever “covert” operation—fomenting a “holy war” against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan—by recruiting an international brigade of Islamic extremists to join the war.

Washington’s aim of bogging the Soviet army in an unwinnable guerrilla war coincided with the interests of numbers of politically reactionary forces. Pakistani dictator General Zia ul Haq eagerly offered his country as a base, in order to garner US support and bolster his

Islamic credentials. The Saudi regime matched Washington's billions with its own money as means of countering the challenge posed by Iran, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and of lifting its flagging political stocks at home. All sorts of extremist groups rallied to the Afghan jihad as a way of getting money, arms, training and enhancing their reputations.

From their base in Malaysia, Sungkar and Bashir seized the opportunity with both hands. Theirs was certainly not the only group to provide recruits for the "holy war". But the two men appear to have had the inside running when it came to getting money and support from Saudi Arabia. Their connections with DDII, and through it to the Islamic World League, seem to have paid off. Dutch academic Van Bruinessen explains: "According to sources close to the Usrah movement [identified with Bashir and Sungkar], 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 communities (jama'ah) capable of jihad" [*The violent fringes of Indonesia's radical Islam*, December 2002, p.5].

A recent ICG report entitled *Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but still Dangerous* estimates that more than 200 men associated with the JI network were sent to Afghanistan. In most cases, the Islamic World League paid their expenses. All of them were trained at the military camps run by the Mujaheddin faction led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Sayyaf, a proponent of strict Wahhabi Islam, had extremely close links to Saudi Arabia and its logistics operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which were run by Osama bin Laden, among others.

Suharto's crackdown on Islamic organisations in the 1980s helped provide Sungkar and Bashir with a steady stream of recruits. With a view to establishing his own military organisation, Sungkar deliberately selected the better educated. Those who completed the full course in Sayyaf's camps received three years of rigorous military and ideological training. The Indonesians were grouped together with Thais, Malaysians and Filipinos and thus made important contacts with other Islamic extremist groups in the region—in particular, the Filipino separatist militia, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the breakaway Abu Sayyaf group.

Media accounts describing Jemaah Islamiyah as the outcome of some inexplicable Machiavellian plot are simply absurd. Without the CIA's dirty operations in Afghanistan, neither Jemaah Islamiyah nor Al Qaeda would have come into existence. The anti-Soviet war provided the money and the training, as well as forging the loose international network of contacts that was to characterise the future modus operandi of these organisations. It also provided participants with powerful new credentials. Upon their return to South East Asia, Washington's "freedom fighters" were treated as heroes within Islamic circles. In Indonesia, they even formed their own veteran organisation—Group 272—the figure being the number of former fighters.

As the ICG explained: "All of JI's top leaders and many of the men involved in JI bombings trained in Afghanistan over a ten-year period, 1985-95. The jihad in Afghanistan had a huge influence in shaping their worldview, reinforcing their commitment to jihad, and providing them with lethal skills... It is important to note that the process of sending recruits to Afghanistan began at least seven years before JI formally came into being. In many ways, the emergence of a formal organisation around 1992 merely institutionalised a network that already existed" [*Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but still Dangerous*, August 2003, p.2].

How the United States' key assets of the 1980s became anti-American terrorists in the 1990s is, above all, a political issue. Just as in the 1960s, when the CIA and the Indonesian military exploited Islamic factions to carry out the mass murder of workers and communists, the operation in Afghanistan was a marriage of convenience. It began to fall apart once the Soviet Union collapsed, followed by its puppet regime in Kabul in 1992. Those who collaborated in the anti-Soviet "jihad" represented dissident sections of the bourgeoisie of a number of countries, whose class interests happened to coincide with those of Washington during the Afghan war. Once the war was over, their interests began to diverge.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* article "What is bin Ladenism?" explained: Al Qaeda "is not a political movement of disoriented freedom fighters that somehow expresses the strivings of oppressed but politically confused masses. In both his political views and his activities, bin Laden reflects a dissident and disaffected section of the national bourgeoisie in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East generally. This privileged social layer feels that it has not been treated fairly in its dealings with imperialism and chafes at the limitations imposed on its own ambitions."

The shift in bin Laden's attitude to Washington began during the US-led Gulf War in 1990-91. He had no objection to the murderous military assault on the Iraqi people or the Baathist regime, which he opposed because of its secular character. What bin Laden opposed was the stationing of "infidel" American troops in the land of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He articulated the sentiments of layers of the ruling elite in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East, who felt the Saudi regime was subordinating their interests too directly to Washington.

Exactly when, how and, indeed, if a final complete rupture took place between Washington and its former Islamist allies has never been made clear. In 1993-94, the United States tacitly backed the establishment of the Taliban militia in Afghanistan by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, as a means of imposing order in the country and enabling the building of lucrative oil and gas pipelines into the former Soviet Central Asia. The US has also maintained a highly ambivalent attitude to the activities of Afghan veterans in Chechnya and western China—never quite sure whether to hail them as freedom fighters or denounce them as terrorists. But either directly, or indirectly through Pakistani and Saudi intelligence, the CIA undoubtedly retained contacts with its Afghan "assets" long after the end of the Afghan war.

Part 3

In South East Asia, the network created by the Afghan War drew Islamic extremist groups closer together—a process that appears to have been facilitated by the presence of Al Qaeda figures in the Philippines. Sometime in 1993, Sungkar and Bashir founded Jemaah Islamiyah. As a result of their lengthy exile, they had already established many contacts in Malaysia and Singapore. JI members had, for example, forged ties with the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) in the Philippines—using its bases for military training instead of the increasingly difficult alternative in Afghanistan.

Inside Indonesia, Suharto was making a conscious effort to enlist the support of various Islamist groups as a prop for his increasingly fragile regime. In the early 1990s he made an ostentatious pilgrimage to Mecca and established the Indonesian Association of Islamic Intellectuals (ICMI), under the leadership of his close ally B.J. Habibie. The ICMI was permitted to publish its own daily newspaper *Republika*. Other concessions included proportionate representation for Muslims in the state bureaucracy and the military, the

setting up of an Islamic bank and legislation to enhance the status of Islamic courts.

Suharto's tactical manoeuvres quickly bore fruit. Hardline DDII leaders fell in behind him, becoming prominent in the formation of KISMI, the Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the World of Islam. KISMI had close links to Suharto—through his son-in-law, General Prabowo Subianto—and became a platform for championing “Islamic causes” such as the oppression of Muslims in Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya and Algeria. While Bashir and Sungkar remained in exile, continuing to oppose Suharto, the new climate was certainly conducive to JI's politics.

The crucial turning point in JI's evolution came in 1997-98 with the Asian financial crisis—an economic meltdown that served to exacerbate social and political tensions throughout the region. In Indonesia, the value of the rupiah plummeted, businesses were bankrupted and the debt-laden financial system was brought to the brink of collapse. Levels of poverty and unemployment rose sharply. The US and the IMF further compounded the economic and social turmoil by insisting that Suharto implement far-reaching restructuring measures.

Suharto's position rapidly became untenable. Unwilling to comply with IMF demands that threatened his monopoly of economic and political power, the Indonesian president lost the unconditional backing of Washington. At the same time, he confronted mounting protests, spearheaded by students, who were demanding an end to his 32-year dictatorship, along with measures to arrest falling living standards. Suharto was finally compelled to step down in May 1998 and hand over power to his loyal ally Vice President Habibie.

Significantly, Sungkar, Bashir and JI played no role in the downfall of Suharto. Inside Indonesia, KISMI and other rightwing Islamist groups backed the president to the bitter end. After Suharto was ousted, they threw their support behind Habibie. When, in November 1998, Habibie faced a fresh crisis as he sought to use a special parliamentary session to consolidate his grip on power, KISMI helped organise his defence. It provided most of the 100,000 “volunteers”—thugs armed with batons and knives—who, along with army troops, intimidated and attacked huge protests demanding Habibie's resignation and genuine democratic elections.

But the most critical role in propping up Habibie's regime was played by the bourgeois “reformers”—Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais. At the height of the demonstrations all three agreed to Habibie's limited measures, effectively giving the green light for the violent suppression of the demonstrations.

As the protest movement waned, the military deliberately fomented communal conflict as a means of reasserting its authority. In 1999, the TNI top brass was intimately connected with the wave of terror unleashed by pro-Jakarta militia against pro-independence supporters in East Timor. The army was also deeply involved in the promotion of sectarian violence in the Maluku and Sulawesi in 2000.

In the absence of any progressive alternative aimed at unifying all sections of the Indonesian working class and oppressed masses around the struggle for genuine social equality, JI and other Islamic extremist groups were able to exploit these communal tensions. Sections of the middle class and small business, suddenly bankrupted by the financial crisis, were ready to believe propaganda blaming their new predicament on the corrupting influence of Christians and ethnic Chinese. Young people with technical or university education and rosy future prospects saw their careers collapse before their eyes.

They rapidly became disenchanted with the hollow rhetoric of the “reformers” and disaffected with the state of society as a whole. Some, out of despair and desperation, turned to Islamist groups and militia such as JI.

Moreover, JI’s anti-American propaganda found a wider audience. Many Indonesians were angry at Washington’s IMF agenda, with its devastating social consequences. In the ensuing five years, that hostility has been further compounded by the Australian-led intervention in East Timor, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and continuing US support for Israel’s repression against the Palestinians. All of this has been seized upon by JI as “proof” of an anti-Islamic conspiracy.

Terrorist attacks

Bashir, Sungkar and other JI members returned to Indonesia in 1999 and began expanding their small network of Islamic schools. After Sungkar’s death, Bashir assumed the role of ideological leader. He established the Mujaheddin Council of Indonesia (MMI) that included other individuals and groups intent on establishing an Islamic state. In August 2000, MMI held its first congress in Yogyakarta, which was attended by some 1,500 people, including figures such as the chairman of the Justice Party, Hidayat Nur Muhammad. Bashir, who was elected supreme leader, boasted that the body had connections with major Muslim organisations.

The main emphasis at the congress was on moral strictures: the banning of alcohol and the imposition of restrictions on women. But the MMI also recruited its own militia units and dispatched them, with the tacit approval of the military, to take part in communal fighting in the Maluku, which claimed an estimated 5,000 lives. In turn, the Maluku conflict provided JI with new members who had military training and experience, as well as being ideologically committed.

Terrorist bombings began in Indonesia in 1999-2000 and JI has been specifically linked to two. On Christmas Eve 2000, a coordinated series of bomb blasts took place across the country. More than 30 bombs were set to explode at the same time at Christian churches or the homes of clergy in 11 cities in six different provinces. Nineteen people were killed and around 120 were injured. Two years later, the Bali atrocity occurred.

Several of the perpetrators were Afghan veterans who had been recruited via the Bashir-Sungkar network. The ICG report *Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but still Dangerous* provides a long list of the names of trainees and their dates of training at Sayyaf’s camps in Afghanistan. The list includes key figures in the 2000 church bombings and the Bali attack. Three of the four men so far convicted in the Bali bombings, for example, served in Afghanistan: Muchlas alias Ali Gufron [1986], Ali Imron [1990] and Abdul Aziz alias Imam Samudra [1991].

But the full story of these terrorist attacks is yet to be told. The most obvious questions—about the role of the Indonesian military—remain unanswered. It is simply not plausible that Indonesia’s vast security and intelligence apparatus knew nothing about the large logistical operation involved in the Bali bombings. Yet no investigation has been carried out into precisely what information military officials had prior to the attack. Any leads casting suspicion on the TNI—including the detention of a military officer—have been quickly dropped.

The TNI has a long and sordid history of political thuggery. It also has decades of experience in penetrating and manipulating militia groups and gangs, including Islamic extremist organisations. Earlier this year, six special forces soldiers, including an officer, were convicted over the political assassination of a prominent Papuan leader. Moreover, sections of the military have several motives for staging a spectacular terrorist attack, or allowing one to take place, including creating a justification for greater US military aid and cooperation, which is currently subject to a US Congressional ban.

Bashir's involvement in the Bali attack remains unclear. ICG reports indicate evidence of divisions in JI between Bashir, who appears intent on using the MMI to gain influence with the established parties, and the younger Afghan veterans, who are keen to use their military skills. It is significant that while Bashir has been tried—and acquitted—in relation to the Christmas 2000 bombings, he has never been charged over Bali.

Whether or not he personally planned or authorised the Bali bombings, Bashir bears responsibility for the political perspective that led to the senseless death of 202 innocent people. Any organisation whose members hail such a tragedy as a "victory" has nothing to do with the interests of the working class. JI's vision of a society run by clerics enforcing a mediaeval moral code is irreconcilably opposed to the democratic rights and aspirations of the masses of ordinary working people.

The very emergence of JI, and its ability to make an appeal to significant sections of the Indonesian population, constitutes the most malignant expression of the incapacity of the entire Indonesian ruling elite to offer any solution to the deepening political, social and economic crisis confronting the vast majority of the population. A genuine solution to this crisis, however, lies not in the rise to power of another section of the bourgeoisie, committed to medievalism and Islamic fundamentalism, but the socialist reorganisation of society—on the basis of genuine social equality, justice and democracy for all, not just the privileged few. This requires building a new political movement of the working class that will fight to unite all layers of workers and the oppressed masses—in Indonesia, throughout Asia and internationally—in a common struggle against the current economic and social order.

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