

"The violent fringes of Indonesia's radical Islam", background information after the Bali bombing of October 2002. Extended version of article published in *ISIM Newsletter* 11 (December 2002), p. 7.

The violent fringes of Indonesia's radical Islam

Martin van Bruinessen

The October 12 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 ignoring the presence on Indonesian soil of Islamic terrorists, connected with the al-Qa'ida network. Self-styled terrorism experts at once claimed to recognize the signature of al-Qa'ida's alleged regional mastermind Hambali, who was believed to have planned a similar bombing of the US Embassy in Singapore. More sober voices commented that domestic power struggles 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; the country had seen many of those since the fall of Suharto in May 1998, and in many cases military personnel — 'rogue' elements, 'deserters', retired or indeed active officers — appeared to be involved. There are also, however, a number of relatively small but conspicuously violent radical Islamic movements, that engage in *jihād* in such places as the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi or act as vigilante squads raiding nightclubs, discotheques and other dens of inequity.^[1] Surprisingly perhaps, several of these militias maintain close relations with factions in the military or political elite.

Laskar Jihad

The largest and best organized of the various Muslim militias — until it was suddenly disbanded in early October, just one or a few 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.^[2] 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 apolitical Islam based on a strictly literal reading of the Qur'an and *hadith*. Most members appeared to be students or university graduates and dropouts. Religious leadership is provided by young men, mostly of Arab descent like Ja`far himself, who have also studied with Arabian Salafi ulama.

President Abdurrahman Wahid attempted to prevent *Laskar Jihad* activists from leaving for the Moluccas, but *Laskar Jihad* had the visible support of elements in the police and armed forces. It moved thousands of fighters to Ambon and later to other conflict areas in Central Sulawesi, West Papua, and Aceh. In all these areas, a close cooperation with the Indonesian military, notably the Special Forces (*Kopassus*) developed.

Following September 11, Laskar Jihad immediately took pains to distance itself from Osama bin Laden. Ja`far Umar Thalib declared that he had met Osama back in the 1980s when he fought in Afghanistan but did not consider him as a good Muslim. The Laskar Jihad website reproduced a *fatwa* by the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz bin Baz, in which Osama bin Laden was declared an erring sectarian and rebel, whose example no pious Muslim should follow.

Unlike the *Majelis Mujahidin* (see below), the *Laskar Jihad* accepts the Indonesian government as legitimate in principle, and it does not strive to establish an Islamic state in its place. This did not prevent the organisation from opposing Indonesia's last two presidents for other reasons: Abdurrahman Wahid because he refused, in their view, to protect the Moluccan Muslims against their Christian oppressors and often made pro-Christian statements, and Megawati because she is a woman and therefore, in the Salafi view, cannot be a legitimate ruler. Relations with the vice president, Hamzah Haz, have been cordial.

In April 2002, the Laskar Jihad challenged a peace agreement between Ambonese Christians and Muslims that had been brokered by cabinet ministers. Its radio broadcast a particularly incendiary speech by Ja`far Umar Thalib; a Christian village was

raided and part of its population massacred. Eyewitnesses claim that Laskar Jihad fighters carried out this raid jointly with a Special Forces (Kopassus) unit. This time, Ja`far was detained and put on trial. While his trial was continuing, Ja`far announced in early October 2002 the disbanding of the *Laskar Jihad* and ordered his followers to return to their homes. These instructions were in most places obeyed with a surprising meekness. Some observers speculated that the organisation had run into financial difficulties, others perceived the strong hand of the military. Ja`far himself attributed the decision to pressure from one of his Saudi teachers, who had been angered by his involvement in politics.

Front Pembela Islam

This 'Front of Defenders of Islam,' dressed in white flowing robes and white turbans, has been conspicuous in numerous demonstrations in Jakarta. They were the largest group of demonstrators in front of the U. S. Embassy in Jakarta when the bombing of Afghanistan began and promised to send volunteers to defend their fellow Muslims against the American offensive (none appear to have gone, however). They carried out numerous raids on bars, brothels and nightclubs in Jakarta and nearby hill districts, causing great material damage but few casualties. Their leader, Habib (Sayyid) Rizieq Shihab, also studied in Saudi Arabia and is a firm proponent of the application of the *shari`a* in public life. He appears to have excellent relations with members of the military and political elite. The raids carried out by his militias appear to be co-ordinated well with the police; a rival vigilante group, Pemuda Pancasila (which ran protection rackets under the Suharto regime), has accused the FPI of raiding those bars and clubs that do not pay sufficient protection money. The Front is definitely the least ideologically motivated of the militant groups listed here, and it is believed that its successes in bringing demonstrators on the streets are primarily due to financial incentives. Not long after October 12, Rizieq Shihab was arrested (for reasons apparently unrelated to the Bali bombing) and the Front was ordered to disband itself, which the members did without any sign of protest.

Jemaah Islamiyah (Jama`ah Islamiyah)

The organisation most often mentioned as a likely perpetrator of the Bali bomb massacre is the Jemaah Islamiyah (Jama`ah Islamiyah), which has been described by some terrorism experts as the Southeast Asian branch of al-Qa`ida. Four alleged members of this network are often mentioned as its chief terrorists:

— Hambali, alias Ridwan Isamuddin, a West Javanese and allegedly Southeast Asia's most dangerous terrorist. Accused of masterminding the bombing of churches in 10 Indonesian cities at Christmas 2000, of taking part in a series of bombings in Manila in 2000, and of planning a terrorist attack on a Singapore train station frequented by U.S. military personnel, and of a series on car bombs against western embassies in Singapore. Hambali is still at large.

— Abdur Rahman al-Ghozi, an East Javanese, arrested in the Philippines in January 2002, accused of forging documents and of possession of explosives, apparently bought in the southern Philippines for use elsewhere in Southeast Asia. He reportedly confessed to having taking part in the same bombings in Manila in 2000, and in preparations for attacks on US assets in Singapore.

— Muhammad Iqbal bin Abdurrahman, alias Abu Jibril, born in the island of Lombok. The author of a book on the obligation for every Muslim to carry out *jihad* , and a recruiter for *jihad* in the Moluccas after the civil war between Christians and Muslims had broken out there. Detained in Malaysia since January 2002 and accused of acting as a financial conduit for al-Qa`ida.

— Agus Dwikarna, arrested at Manila airport in March 2002 when the authorities allegedly found a large amount of explosives in his luggage (which according to Dwikarna himself must have been planted by the police). Dwikarna is the commander of a Muslim militia, *Jundullah* , in his native province of South Sulawesi. He is accused of involvement in the Manila and Jakarta bombings and is said to have guided al-Qa`ida operatives on a tour in Aceh.

The Muslim cleric, Abu Bakar Ba`asyir, is alleged to be the

spiritual leader of this terrorist network, although he cannot be directly linked to any of the said terrorist incidents. All four men named above have an undeniable direct connection with him, however: al-Ghozi studied at his school, Abu Jibril paid a recent visit to the school and took part in the founding conference of a militant organization that chose Ba`asyir as its leader, and Dwikarna is a committee member of that same organization. Hambali is reported to have lived near Ba`asyir during part of the period the latter spent in Malaysia. Singapore intelligence sources claim that Hambali is Ba`asyir's closest collaborator and second-in-command, but there is no independent confirmation of recent contact between the two men.

Much incriminating evidence against these men comes from the confessions of an alleged Al-Qa'ida liaison officer of Kuwaiti origin arrested in Bogor in April 2002, a certain Omar al-Faruq. He was immediately handed over to the Americans and flown to Afghanistan for interrogation, where he provided them with very detailed information on past and planned terrorist activities by the Jama`ah Islamiyah. Scepticism about the identity of this Omar al-Faruq and the truth of his confessions is widespread in Indonesia.

It is not entirely clear to what extent this Jama`ah Islamiyah actually is a real organisation with a well-defined membership and structure of authority. Its alleged leader, Abu Bakar Ba`asyir, has not been afraid of openly proclaiming his admiration for Osama bin Laden, but he denies any direct contact with him. Ba`asyir is the *amir* or commander of a public association of radical Muslims, the Council of Jihad Fighters (*Majelis Mujahidin*), that was established in August 2002. This organization has a paramilitary 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 have combat experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s; a larger number is likely to have fought in the southern Philippines.

Ba`asyir has repeatedly denied the existence of an organization named Jama`ah Islamiyah — but this term has during the past twenty years repeatedly been used by police authorities as the name for a loose network of radicals in which Ba`asyir played a central role, besides another preacher of Arab descent, Abdullah Sungkar. Many of the founding members of the *Majelis*

Mujahidin belonged to this network, as did the four suspected terrorists mentioned above. It is not clear whether Hambali and the others are core members of Ba`asyir's network or more peripheral members who have gone off on a course of their own.

Sungkar and Ba`asyir, who jointly led a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) near the town of Solo, were arrested in the late 1970s for their involvement in a violent underground movement popularly known as Komando Jihad. This movement aimed at the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia and carried out a number of bombings of cinemas, night clubs and churches. Interestingly, Komando Jihad was to a considerable degree controlled by one of the intelligence services and served the useful function of legitimatising clampdowns on less radical and non-violent Muslim politicians. Komando Jihad consisted mostly of men who had been active in the Darul Islam movement, which from 1949 to 1962 had opposed the secular Indonesian republic and fought for an Indonesian Islamic State. The Darul Islam movement did not have a clear concept of what an Islamic state was to be like, apart from the unreflected idea that all laws should be based on the *shari`ah*, Islamic law.

Sungkar and Ba`asyir were late joiners, but they contributed to the movement ideas that they borrowed from the Egyptian Muslim Brothers (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*). 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' (*usrah*) of like-minded people who guide, help and control one another. These are steps towards the building of an Islamic community (*jama`ah islamiyah*), which in turn is a precondition for the establishment of an Islamic state. From their Islamic school near Solo, Ba`asyir and Sungkar set up a network of committed young Muslims, some of them quietist, some of them militants, all of them opposed to the Suharto regime, organised in 'families,' that together were to constitute a true community of committed Muslims, a *Jama`ah Islamiyah*. Following a wave of arrests, the authorities spoke of the 'Usrah movement' or 'the' *Jama`ah Islamiyah*.

Ba`asyir and Sungkar remained under detention for several years, and upon release in the mid-1980s escaped to Malaysia. This move may have been related to their recruitment for the Afghan

jihad, which occurred around the same time. According to sources close to the Usrah 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 communities (*jama`ah*) capable of *jihad*. Both were offered financial support to send 50 fighters to Afghanistan. Sungkar found only 4 men willing to go, the other group 8 men. The following year, slightly larger groups of volunteers were sent, and so it went on until 1989, when the Russians withdrew from Afghanistan. The Afghan infighting of the following years was not considered as *jihad*, and Sungkar and Ba`asyir's *Jama`ah Islamiyah* looked elsewhere for a worthy cause and training ground. Henceforth, they sent their militants to the southern Philippines.

For fourteen years, Sungkar and Ba`asyir remained in Malaysia, living in a village with a circle of their closest disciples and travelling around delivering religious sermons. The group around them included mostly other refugees from Indonesia; they were visited by radicals from Indonesia and other regions of Southeast Asia. After Suharto's fall, they returned to Indonesia. Sungkar died in Jakarta during his first return visit; Ba`asyir settled again in his *pesantren* at Ngruki near Solo. The establishment of the *Majelis Mujahidin* in August 2000 gave him a very public profile.

Darul Islam or NII/TII

Ba`asyir's group is not the only radical group coming out of the Darul Islam movement. There are a number of loosely connected and to some extent competing underground networks that continue the struggle for an Islamic state in Indonesia. They go by the old name of Darul Islam or alternatively NII/TII, abbreviations for Islamic State of Indonesia / Islamic Army of Indonesia. Strictly hierarchically organized, they organize paramilitary training for their members. They are not known to have been involved in major violent incidents recently. Their major difference with Ba`asyir's group, apart from personal rivalries, is that the Darul Islam is focused exclusively on Indonesia. The *Jama`ah Islamiyah* allegedly rejects this as narrow nationalism (*`asabiyah*) and strives for a larger Islamic state encompassing all Muslim regions of Southeast Asia.

One particular regional command of the Darul Islam, active in the larger Jakarta region, has recently received some public attention for its unconventional fundraising activities, which included extortion and robbery on a large scale. According to a former member, this organisation could act with relative impunity due to the connivance of certain officers of the state security organisation (BAKIN, presently BIN), with whom it shared the proceeds.

Laskar Jundullah

This is a regional militia in South Sulawesi, claiming a historical connection with the Darul Islam movement of that province. It appears to be primarily active in the Poso district of Central Sulawesi, which has seen vicious fighting between Christians and Muslims (and where the Muslims are in the weaker position). Ideologically, the movement is close to the *Majelis Mujahidin*, of which its commander, Agus Dwikarna, is a committee member. It is devoted to the full application of the *shari`a* in all of Indonesia or at least — with an appeal to recent regional autonomy legislation — in its own region of activity, South and Central Sulawesi. *Laskar Jundullah* is believed to have very professional guerrilla training and to run a training camp in the Poso area. Dwikarna's arrest in the Philippines, in March 2002, does not appear to have paralysed the movement's activities.

The ease with which FPI and Laskar Jihad could be disbanded once the military authorities really demanded so not only indicates the degree to which both have come military influence but also reflects the fact that they accept the (secular) government of Indonesia as legitimate in principle -- unlike the Majelis Mujahidin and its affiliated militias, which wish to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state and have not been known to court military or civilian elite factions.

[1]Martin van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia", *South East Asia Research* 10 no.2 (2002), 117-154.

[2]Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and politics: the rise of the Laskar Jihad in the era of transition in Indonesia", *Indonesia* 73 (2002), 145-169.

This article was published in slightly abbreviated form in ISIM Newsletter 11 (December 2002)