

Pressure builds on Jakarta to toe the line on Bush's "war on terrorism"

John Roberts
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An alleged plot to attack US and Western facilities in Singapore has become the pretext for putting pressure on Indonesia to play an active role in the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism". The issue has already provoked sharp public exchanges between Singapore and Jakarta. Behind-the-scenes, Washington is insisting that Indonesia arrest two Islamic clerics it claims are linked to the plans.

Singaporean authorities detained 15 people in December, accusing them of planning to blow up the US embassy and other targets on the island and of having connections to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda via a network known as Jemaah Islamiah. Two of those arrested have since been released but the remainder are still being held under the Internal Security Act (ISA) that provides for lengthy detention without trial.

Police claim the detainees had access to explosives and were assessing possible targets, but under the ISA, none of the evidence has been made public. Based on the interrogation of prisoners, the Singapore government alleged that two Indonesian clerics were involved in the plot. Riudan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali, was accused of being the operation's mastermind, and Abu Bakar Bashir of being the ideologue behind Jemaah Islamiah and responsible for funnelling Saudi money to Islamic extremist groups in the region.

In Malaysia, the government has also been arresting "terrorist suspects" under its own virtually identical ISA in a barely concealed attempt to harass and intimidate its political rival, the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). Immediately after the arrests in Singapore, Malaysian police changed their tune, claiming that 22 of their 47 detainees were connected to Abu Bakar and Jemaah Islamiah rather than the Malaysian group, Kumpulan Mujahhidin Malaysia (KMM). Again no evidence has been made public.

Indonesian authorities have interviewed Abu Bakar, who heads a religious school in Central Java, and released him saying that there was not sufficient evidence to press charges. Abu Bakar has denied any connection with Jemaah Islamiah or any contact with Hambali since 1999. Police officials have said they have not been able to locate Hambali. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Abu Bakar commented: "I don't believe that there was any plan [to bomb targets in Singapore]."

Since September 11, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri has been treading a fine line between tacit support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and the hostility that it has produced in the world's largest predominantly Muslim

country. The fragile ruling coalition on which Megawati rests includes a number of rightwing Islamic parties that were critical of the war on Afghanistan. Now that Washington has begun to target South East Asia and Indonesia in particular, the tensions have only intensified.

Megawati fears that open support for the Bush administration may provoke protests not only against the US but the government as well. There is not only hostility to US aggression against impoverished Afghanistan but also widespread resentment over the poverty and unemployment produced by the economic restructuring measures insisted upon by the IMF and Washington.

More fuel was added to the fire last month when Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew accused Indonesia of endangering his country's security by failing to act on intelligence information provided to it and allowing "terrorists" to remain at large. Lee's remarks drew an immediate and sharp response in Jakarta where Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda described them as provocative and unsubstantiated. Singapore's ambassador was summoned to the foreign ministry on February 21 and a letter was sent to Lee demanding he clarify his remarks.

Singapore responded by saying it would prove the links between the two Indonesian clerics and invited Indonesian authorities to question the 13 detainees. Jakarta agreed to send police but declared that two previous expeditions had failed to produce any evidence that would stand up in court. Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan insisted that the problem was the authoritarian character of the Singapore government, which did not understand that mere suspicion was not sufficient grounds for arrests in Indonesia.

On February 26, about 500 people took part in a demonstration outside the Singaporean embassy in Jakarta to protest Lee's remarks. The gathering had a marked anti-Chinese edge with Islamic groups accusing Singapore of supporting "terrorists"—by harbouring ethnic Chinese businessmen who left Indonesia in the late 1990s, due to anti-Chinese violence. Abu Bakar further stirred up the issue by attempting to launch a defamation case against Lee.

Both Indonesia and Singapore have a record of attacking each other to whip up communal sentiment at home—anti-Chinese, in the case of Jakarta, and anti-Muslim, on the part of Singapore. But Lee's open attack on Jakarta for being "soft" on terrorism was primarily aimed at currying favour with Washington rather than at a domestic audience. Other countries including Malaysia and Australia have been, albeit somewhat more quietly, urging Jakarta

to take a “tougher stand”.

On February 27, Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill, speaking at the 2002 Asian Aerospace conference in Singapore, declared: “We wish to encourage the Indonesian government to combat these terrorist groupings within Indonesia more effectively than what they’ve been able to do to date.” Hill’s comments reinforced the message of Prime Minister John Howard who was in Jakarta earlier in the month and signed an agreement with the Megawati government to cooperate on anti-terrorist measures.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed has also been privately urging Megawati to accede to US demands for tougher measures. On February 20, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur signed a formal agreement similar to the one with Canberra. Megawati had no doubt hoped that these deals would help to ease the diplomatic pressure but the US-inspired campaign has shown no signs of abating.

While the Bush administration has not publicly criticised Jakarta as yet, the US media has published a significant number of articles, quoting unnamed US officials, voicing dissatisfaction with Megawati’s “lack of action”. *Time* magazine has carried several extensive reports on the “terrorist web” in South East Asia linking Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines, and stating as fact what remain unsubstantiated allegations about Abu Bakar and Hambali.

As well as political pressure, Indonesia also faces the danger of economic measures. As the *Far Eastern Economic Review* noted in its latest issue: “The longer the situation drags on, the more Jakarta could become isolated. Both the No Safe Harbour bill before Congress and the recent expansion of the multinational Financial Action Task Force’s mandate... promise tough new economic and travel sanctions on nations that don’t cooperate. Using a baseball analogy, a US law enforcement officer says: ‘We can’t even find them [Indonesia] in the dugout, let alone stepping up to the plate.’”

Pointing to Washington’s plans, US CIA Director George Tenet has named Indonesia, along with Somalia, Yemen and the Philippines, as countries where US military action is being considered. US special forces troops are already operating in the Philippines, ostensibly as “advisers” to local soldiers engaged in operations on Basilan against the Abu Sayyaf organisation.

An article in the *New York Times* on February 13, dealing with possible new targets in the “war against terrorism,” commented: “The war will focus on Iraq, but this will not be the only action against terrorism.” Along with the Philippines, Yemen and Sudan, it also referred to Bush officials who were considering “asking” Indonesia to accept a force similar to that in the Philippines.

At present, the US military is prevented from openly cooperating with the Indonesian armed forces by a Congressional ban imposed after the Indonesian military was implicated in organising violent attacks on pro-independence supporters in East Timor in 1999. The Bush administration has been pressing for the ban to be lifted in order to reestablish close US-Indonesian military links. Last year Congress eased the embargo to allow some Indonesian officers to be trained in the US. According to media reports, the Pentagon is keen to use all or most of its special \$21 million anti-terrorist budget to bolster the Indonesian army.

As in the case of Afghanistan, the Bush administration’s ambitions for military involvement in Indonesian have nothing to do with the threat of terrorism. The US has always had significant strategic and economic interests in Indonesia, which lies across key sea lanes and has considerable economic importance as a source of cheap labour and raw materials including oil. For more than three decades, Washington backed the brutal Suharto dictatorship before it became an obstacle to shifting US economic priorities. The collapse of the Suharto junta in 1998 has led to a succession of unstable administrations in Jakarta. In this volatile political situation, the Bush administration is keen to reestablish the old ties with the Indonesian military.

But there are broader considerations that reflect the wider US focus on South East Asia as a whole. In line with Bush’s stance towards China as a “strategic competitor,” his administration has been actively strengthening alliances in North East Asia, on the Indian subcontinent and establishing new relations and military bases in Central Asia. South East Asia is a key link in a strategic pattern that has as its aim the encirclement of China. Like Central Asia, the region also has significant reserves of oil and gas, notably in the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Fears have been expressed about the political dangers inherent in the Bush administration’s heavy-handed approach to Indonesia. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented in January: “The fear is that the US will lack the patience and subtlety needed to end the regional terrorist menace without destabilising fragile administrations and disturbing religious and ethnic sensitivities.”

Former US National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, who is currently reviewing US intelligence services on behalf of the Bush administration, called for assistance for Indonesia, which he described as “still just barely a country”. He bluntly warned that pressure on Megawati at this critical moment risked causing “some explosion or a fracture in the country”.

It is highly unlikely, however, that Bush will heed any of these warnings. As elsewhere, his administration is aggressively pursuing its plans regardless of the potentially disastrous results.



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