

Unanswered questions in Bali bombing investigations

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Indonesian and Australian police are claiming a major breakthrough in their investigation into the Bali bombings, following the questioning of a man in his thirties, Amrozi, who was detained last week in the village of Tenggulun near the east Javan city of Surabaya.

According to police, Amrozi was the owner of the Mitsubishi L300 minivan containing a large bomb that devastated the Sari Club in the Kuta Beach tourist area on the night of October 12 and killed more than 180 people. He is reported to have confessed to building the bomb and to participating in setting it off.

Head of the Indonesian investigating team, General I Made Pastika, said that Amrozi had bought a quantity of the fertiliser ammonium nitrate in Surabaya which was used in building the bomb. According to Pastika, between five and nine other suspects, including several of Amrozi's brothers, had been identified as part of the plot and were being tracked down by police.

Two other men have been detained for questioning—Muhammad Zakaria, the head of an Islamic boarding school that Amrozi apparently visited, and Silvester Tendean, the owner of the chemical store where Amrozi allegedly bought explosives. Police reported that Amrozi had taken them to several locations in the Balinese provincial capital, Denpasar, which were used by the plotters.

The focus on Amrozi, particularly in the Australian media, stems from his possible connections to alleged leaders of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) network—Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir and Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali. According to Pastika, Amrozi admitted to having met with both—with Bashir while attending a graduation ceremony at the village Islamic school. Bashir has denied any acquaintance with Amrozi, and has consistently rejected allegations that he is JI's "spiritual leader" or was responsible for the Bali attack.

A great deal is at stake politically in Jakarta, Canberra and Washington as to the identity of the Bali bombers. From the very outset, the Howard government and the Australian media, with the backing of the Bush administration, have sheeted home blame to JI and Bashir. Despite a lack of evidence, the US and Australia have outlawed JI, pressed the UN to brand it a terrorist organisation and pressured Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri into issuing draconian anti-terrorist measures and detaining Bashir.

The Howard government will exploit any evidence linking JI to the bombing to exert further pressure on Megawati. The Australians want her to crack down harder on Islamic extremists, while seeking to develop closer ties with the Indonesian military—all in the name of fighting "terrorism". It is not surprising, therefore, that the weekend edition of Murdoch's *Australian* carried a front-page headline "Bali bombs: al Qaeda did it" and a commentary declaring alleged JI leader Hambali "almost definitively" guilty of ordering the attack.

It is entirely possible that Islamic extremists, whether connected to JI or not, may have been responsible. Pastika reported that Amrozi told his interrogators that he carried out the bombing because he wanted "to kill as

many Americans as possible" and was "disappointed" that the majority of dead were Australians. If that proves to be correct, Amrozi's statements reflect the reactionary ideology, promoted by Bashir among others, that has gained ground in Indonesia and elsewhere as a result of US aggression in Afghanistan and its policies in the Middle East.

At this stage, however, no definitive connection has been established between Amrozi and JI. Nor is it clear whether Amrozi was acting on his own initiative or on the orders of others. Police spokesman Commander Prasetyo commented late last week that there were many unanswered questions. "We are still investigating whether he was the operator and executor, or controller or intellectual mastermind behind it all," he said.

From the start, contradictory statements, both official and unofficial, have plagued the investigation. Moreover, like so-called terrorist suspects held by the US in Afghanistan and Cuba, or "JI members" detained by the Malaysian and Singaporean governments, Amrozi is being held incommunicado under Megawati's decree, allowing for protracted detention without trial. He has not appeared before the media let alone a court of law, and the statements attributed to him by police remain completely untested.

It is worth recalling that within days of the bomb blasts, Indonesian police reported that Lieutenant Colonel Dedy Masrukhin, a former air force officer trained in handling explosives, had been detained and had confessed to building the bomb. The report was soon retracted, followed by a series of conflicting statements over Masrukhin's detention. Then he simply dropped out of sight as a suspect, without further explanation.

A week and a half ago, police made public sketch portraits of three suspects and announced a major campaign was underway to find them. This was followed by an announcement that one R.S., a man resembling one of the suspects, had been detained on the island of Flores, where he was said to have been acting suspiciously. Two days later he was released. Last week, another "breakthrough" was announced with the arrest of two men—one named as Zulfan in Medan in northern Sumatra and another in Jakarta—who bore close resemblances to the suspects. Zulfan has since been released.

It may well turn out that Amrozi was involved in the Bali bombings. If what the police have stated is true, the case against him appears to be strong. It is strange, however, if Amrozi is a hardened JI operative, who, according to national police chief General Da'i Bachtiar, had "field responsibility" for the Bali bombings, that, in less than 48 hours, he confessed to everything, including a series of other bombings, and blurted out the names of his accomplices.

Certainly his alleged involvement in the bombings came as a shock to his neighbours in the village of Tenggulun. They insisted to reporters that he showed no signs of fanaticism. "He likes to joke... I have never heard him talking about religion, I never heard him talking about the West or the US... I don't believe it," one declared.

On Sunday, a former State Intelligence Coordinating Board official A.C. Manullang commented to the *Jakarta Post*: "It is hard to believe that a

junior high school graduate such as Amrozi could be part of a professional team who exploded the bombs in Bali.” He also questioned the ease with which the police had uncovered evidence at Amrozi’s house. “Usually, a suspect hides or destroys incriminating evidence,” he said.

The character of the police inquiries into the Bali bombing raises questions, not just about the perpetrators, but about the investigators. The welter of conflicting reports from a variety of official spokesmen, Indonesian and Australian, reflect the fact that there is not just one, but a number of competing investigations, each guided by a different political agenda.

At the insistence of the Howard government, a large contingent of around 120 Australian police, forensic experts and intelligence agents is currently conducting a joint inquiry with Indonesian police in Bali. FBI agents, Scotland Yard detectives and specialists from Germany, Japan and other countries are also in Indonesia as part of the Indonesian-Australian investigation.

A separate investigation is being conducted by the powerful State Intelligence Agency (BIN) headed by former Lieutenant General Abdullah Mahmud Hendropriyono, who reports directly to President Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Indonesia’s top security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Another inquiry is taking place under the auspices of BAIS, the intelligence agency run by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI).

Based on forensic evidence, there appears to be agreement on the number of bombs and the timing of the blasts. The first, a one-kilogram device, was detonated in Paddy’s Bar, a Kuta Beach nightclub on Legian street at 11.05pm on October 12. Ten to 15 seconds later, as people came into the street to see what was happening, a much larger bomb, containing 50 to 100 kilograms of explosives packed in a Mitsubishi van, was set off outside the nearby Sari Club with devastating effect. At 11.06pm, another 1kg bomb went off some kilometres away—on a street near the American consulate in Denpasar. All three were triggered by mobile phones.

According to the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the type of bombs and the precision of the operation indicated that those responsible were “well trained and coordinated” and that the events were planned “to achieve maximum casualties”. An AFP spokesman pointed out that the skill level of the bomb-makers was “of an above-average standard” and the bombs were “well placed to take advantage of surrounding buildings” so as to maximise the impact.

There are continuing disagreements, however, over the type of explosives used. Just days after the blasts, BIN chief Hendropriyono announced that investigators had found traces of C4 at the scene. The claim was contradicted by AFP investigators, who insisted the bomb was made up mainly of ammonium nitrate. The AFP subsequently announced that a chlorate rather than ammonium nitrate was used, even as Indonesian police continued to maintain that traces of RDX, the prime ingredient of C4, were present. The dispute became so sharp that Indonesian and Australian police “agreed to differ” and have submitted residues to testing laboratories in Britain for a third opinion.

The difference of opinion is not a question of technical expertise but of politics—different explosives point to different perpetrators. Unlike ammonium nitrate, TNT and chlorates, C4 is a military explosive produced in the US and several other countries. Hendropriyono insisted that C4 was not available in Indonesia and therefore its presence indicated that overseas terrorists, not Indonesians, were involved. The purpose of this was to deflect attention from the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) in particular.

In fact the one issue on which all the investigators appear to agree is that there should be no serious inquiry into the possible involvement, either direct or indirect, of the TNI—the organisation that has the longest track record of terrorism in Indonesia. Here, the conflicting political agendas coincide. Neither the Megawati administration, which rests heavily on the

TNI, nor the US and Australian governments, which both want closer ties to the TNI, wish to see the armed forces implicated.

For decades under Suharto, the military along with various associated militia groups and thugs in provocations and outright repression directed at crushing any political opposition. After Suharto’s fall in 1998, the TNI has been desperate to maintain its political influence and to defend the vast business interests developed during three decades of military dictatorship. It has not hesitated to use the most ruthless methods to justify its continuing role in enforcing internal security.

In 1999, the TNI top brass organised and armed militia groups in East Timor to intimidate and terrorise pro-independence supporters prior to the UN-supervised plebiscite and, when that failed, to go on a violent rampage. Over the past two years, the military has also been involved in fomenting communal violence in areas such as the Malukus and the Sulawesi where hundreds of people have been killed. In Papua and Aceh, the troops have been engaged in the brutal suppression of separatist groups—both legal and illegal. Members of the notorious Kopassus special forces have been charged with the murder last November of Papuan independence advocate Theys Eluay.

Within Indonesia, speculation about military involvement in the Bali attack has been so rife that TNI chief Armed Forces chief General Endriartono Sutarto felt compelled to convene a special press conference on October 24 to deny a series of rumours—including one that implicated two generals who were in Bali prior to the bombings. “We will always follow what the law says. Maybe some members of the TNI have done the wrong thing, but the institution itself comes under the law. If we are found guilty, then shoot us in the head,” he said.

Even if the military did not directly organise the Bali bombings, it is by no means excluded that sections of the military were indirectly involved. The TNI has connections with a number of Islamic extremist groups, including Laskar Jihad which has been involved in communal fighting in the Malukus and Sulawesi.

In this political climate, any claims by police to have solved the case and detained the guilty parties should be treated with considerable scepticism. From the outset, the investigations have been steered by a political agenda that has excluded one of the chief suspects—the Indonesian military.



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