

Australian ABC falls into line on Bali bombing

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In the wake of the Bali bombing on October 12, the Australian media has openly lined up with the Howard government in deliberately cultivating a climate of fear and uncertainty to justify a far-reaching assault on basic democratic rights and support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". Any pretence of independent journalism has been rapidly abandoned as outlets compete to transmit the latest claims of government spokesmen, police and intelligence agencies about the activities of terrorist groups.

A sharp indication of the shift was a *Four Corners* program "The Network," screened on ABC television on October 28, which purported to be a detailed examination of Al Qaeda operations in South East Asia. *Four Corners* has, in the past, carried out serious investigative journalism on a wide range of issues, including sensitive cases of corporate fraud and government corruption. "The Network," however, made no attempt to approach the subject matter critically and dovetailed completely with the Howard government's political agenda.

The program was broadcast just one day after Howard outlawed the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) organisation, which is allegedly linked to Al Qaeda. From the very outset the government accused JI of being responsible for the Bali attack. But it has presented no evidence to support the claim. "The Network" conveniently filled the gap. By regurgitating the allegations of CIA, police and intelligence sources against JI, *Four Corners*, in effect, justified the ban, as well as the violent police raids against Indonesian families in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth that followed.

Al Qaeda and JI may well have carried out the horrific bombings in Bali. Both of these Islamic fundamentalist organisations are reactionary to the core. Their program does not challenge the capitalist system, their policies offer no solution to the suffering confronting the South East Asian masses, and their terrorist methods, which target innocent civilians, provide a convenient pretext for state repression. But a JI plot is only one of the possible scenarios. The Indonesian military and police have a long record of thuggery, violence and political provocation, something which has been all but ignored by the Australian government and media in the wake of the Bali tragedy.

What made "The Network" an abysmal piece of journalism was its completely uncritical approach to the allegations of Al Qaeda and JI activity in South East Asia that have been peddled by various intelligence agencies for months. As a serious investigation, the program failed on every level. It made no attempt to consider alternative hypotheses. It did not in any way challenge the claims made by the intelligence officials and experts being interviewed. And it carried out no independent examination of the roots of Al Qaeda, JI and Islamic fundamentalism.

To even call the program an investigation is something of a misnomer. Most of the "facts" about Al Qaeda and JI could have been obtained by reading the US-based *Time* magazine, which, based on CIA sources, has published a series of sensational articles this year on terrorism in South East Asia. *Four Corners* did nothing more than dress up these claims with

a bit of local "colour".

Reporter Sally Neighbour and her camera crew spent two months in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia obtaining interviews and background shots. All of this was presented, along with the comments of "terrorist experts" and footage of the Bali bombings, in a slick professional package, dramatically heightened with ominous background music and Neighbour's own breathless commentary.

What facts did "The Network" provide?

1. ***Four Corners* obtained copies of two classified documents that summarise the interrogation of Omar al Faruq, an alleged Al Qaeda operative. He was arrested in June by agents of Indonesia's State Intelligence Agency (BIN), handed over to the CIA and quietly whisked out of Indonesia to Afghanistan without even the pretence of due legal process. He was subjected to "relentless interrogation by the CIA" for three months before he "finally cracked" on September 9 and provided information about Al Qaeda's operations in South East Asia.**

According to the CIA, Faruq admitted to having made preparations to attack US and other Western embassies in the region to coincide with the anniversary of the September 11 attacks on the US. He also confessed to plans to attack US naval ships and bomb Christian churches as well as two plots to assassinate Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri. Most significantly from the standpoint of Washington and Canberra, he implicated JI's alleged leader Abu Bakar Bashir.

None of the CIA's claims has been corroborated. Faruq has been held incommunicado in Afghanistan since he was detained. His evidence would not be admissible in any court of law because it was obtained under extreme duress, including, in all likelihood, the use of torture, without the benefit of legal counsel and in open contravention of his most basic rights. It is possible that he simply told his interrogators what they wanted to hear, or that he made no admissions at all.

Faruq's "confession" proved particularly useful to the Bush administration in heightening public fears. On September 11, an alert was issued and US embassies in South East Asia were shut down. Nothing happened and there is no other evidence that attacks were planned on that date. But that did not stop the US from using Faruq's interrogation to step up pressure on Megawati to crack down on JI and arrest Bashir. Sally Neighbour interviewed US Ambassador to Indonesia Ralph Boyce, who was in the forefront of this campaign, but did not use the opportunity to question the veracity of Faruq's statements or the methods used to obtain them.

Interestingly enough, Indonesian authorities, when handed a copy of Faruq's investigation, insisted that there was not enough evidence to arrest Bashir under Indonesian law. But in the wake of the Bali bombing, Megawati succumbed to immense international pressure and changed the law by issuing a decree providing for prolonged detention without trial. Bashir has since been detained for questioning, not over the Bali attack,

but for his alleged role in a series of church bombings in Indonesia in December 2000. He continues to deny any involvement, to insist that he does not know Faruq and to demand the right to confront his accuser in person.

A further question is raised by the involvement of BIN in Faruq's arrest in June. Just three months before, three Indonesians were detained at Manila airport after explosives were found in one of their suitcases. The arrests were hailed as another victory in the "war against terrorism" with BIN claiming credit for providing the tip-off. But the "victory" rapidly turned sour as the trio insisted the material had been planted. Two of the three were released due to lack of evidence.

Although Agus Dwikarna, a member of the Muslim-based National Mandate Party (PAN), is still being held, a number of commentators allege that the entire operation was set up by BIN. In a study published in August, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group concluded: "The claim by Agus Dwikarna and the other two arrested with him in March 2002 that the evidence in their suitcase in Manila was planted appears to be well-founded, but the US government still wants to reward Indonesian intelligence for working with Philippine authorities to bring off the arrest." Significantly, *Four Corners* made no mention of this case.

2. Based on undisclosed intelligence reports and interviews with Colonel Rodolfo Mendoza of the Philippine National Police, Philippine National Security Adviser Roilo Golez and two "experts"—Rohan Gunaratna and Zachary Abuza— *Four Corners* provided a potted history of Al Qaeda's activities in South East Asia.

In 1988, Osama bin Laden sent his brother-in-law Mohammad Jamal Khalifa to the Philippines to set up operations. One of his first contacts was with Riduan Isamuddin, alias Hambali, who is now said to be JI's "operations chief". Khalifa was joined by "a senior aide to Osama," Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, who "is now known to have been a key planner behind September 11", and together established "a major hub for Al Qaeda" in the Philippines.

Two specific incidents were referred to: a plot in the 1990s in Manila to assassinate the Pope and hijack US passenger jets, which "included the idea of crashing hijacked jets into the Pentagon, the World Trade Centre and the CIA," and "an extraordinary meeting" in Kuala Lumpur in January 2000, that included Hambali, Mohammad, two of the September 11 hijackers and one of the Al Qaeda operatives involved in bombing the warship, the USS Cole in Yemen. The CIA tipped off Malaysian intelligence, who monitored the Kuala Lumpur gathering, which was "thought to have been a key planning session for those [the September 11 and the USS Cole] attacks".

Sally Neighbour failed to ask any of those interviewed the most basic question: what was the role of the CIA in establishing Al Qaeda's "hub" in South East Asia? In 1988, bin Laden, Khalifa and Mohammad were part of the CIA's largest-ever covert operation—the funding, arming and training of Mujaheddin fighters against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. Just two years before, CIA chief William Casey had backed a Pakistani plan to recruit thousands of Islamic fundamentalists, like Hambali, to fight alongside the Mujaheddin, who were being hailed in Washington as "freedom fighters," not terrorists.

In the murky world of intelligence, who is an "asset" and who is an enemy is never clear-cut. What contacts did the CIA retain within Al Qaeda and other fundamentalist groups in the 1990s, even as bin Laden became increasingly hostile to Washington? The issue is particularly pertinent when considering the Kuala Lumpur meeting. If the information is accurate, it adds to a growing body of evidence that the US security apparatus had prior knowledge of the September 11 hijackings and did nothing to stop them.

Needless to say, *Four Corners* did not even pose, let alone probe, any of the relevant questions. What did the CIA learn from the Kuala Lumpur

meeting? Why were two of those present at a gathering involving suspected top Al Qaeda leaders subsequently allowed to freely enter the US without any investigation or follow up?

3. Based on the same sources, *Four Corners* asserted that Bashir and Hambali were responsible for setting up a regional terrorist network—sometimes referred to as JI, in other places as the Mujaheddin League. According to National Security Adviser Golez, "parts of northern Australia" are included in JI's aim of establishing an Islamic state throughout South East Asia. Bashir and Hambali were "the architects of a campaign of terror waged over the last three years" which included plots against Western interests, the bombing of churches in Indonesia in 2000 and bomb blasts in the Philippines.

JI is presented as a military-style organisation with a tight command structure. The program lumps together Bashir and Hambali, even though the former has denied any close association with the latter. A number of academics familiar with Islamic groups in the region have raised serious doubts about this interpretation, pointing out that JI, if it exists as a distinct organisation at all, is a rather loose network based on Bashir's Ngruki school in central Java. The International Crisis Group's study concluded: "Association with the Ngruki network is not equivalent to terrorism, and yet the possibility remains that some members of the exile group who have since returned to Indonesia may be sources of support for criminal activities."

Of the bombings and plots sheeted home to JI, only one has resulted in a successful prosecution. Indonesian Fathur al Ghazi, a former student at Bashir's school, was arrested in Manila earlier this year and found guilty of carrying out bomb attacks in the Philippines in December 2000. In the remaining cases, either no one has been arrested or those who have been detained are being held indefinitely without trial in Singapore and Malaysia. Like Faruq, none of their evidence has been tested in a court of law.

Neighbour's interviews with the two "terrorist experts"—Gunaratna and Abuza—added nothing new to the story, other than the weight of their academic credentials. Neighbour did not care to press them on the sources of their information or their connections to various intelligence agencies. Nor did she quiz Golez too closely on why JI would include sparsely inhabited areas of northern Australia, which have never had any historic link to Islam, in its vision of an Islamic state. As far as Neighbour is concerned, any suggestion, even the most far-fetched, is grist for the mill.

4. The program examined one JI plot in particular: a plan to attack Western embassies, US ships and other targets in Singapore, which came to light with the arrest of 31 Singaporeans, beginning last December. Hambali allegedly ordered the attacks, Ghazi provided the bomb-making expertise and a Malaysian bio-chemist, Yazid Sufaat, is said to have obtained four tonnes of the fertiliser ammonium nitrate to make the bombs. *Four Corners* screened lengthy portions of a videotape that is said to have been found in Afghanistan and made by the suspects as part of their preparations. Their defence lawyer, Subhas Anandan, blithely told Sally Neighbour: "All of them have admitted to all the allegations."

Some or all of those detained may have been involved in such a plot. But neither the evidence nor the alleged confessions of the suspects have been tested in court. They are being held under the Singapore's notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), which provides for indefinite detention without trial. Likewise, the biochemist Yazid Sufaat, is being held under Malaysia's version of the ISA and has never had the luxury of a court case. The videotape was made in 1997, four years before the arrests and features a subway station—not the alleged targets. It shows nothing more than a possible connection to Al Qaeda.

In all of the above, there is one glaring omission. No mention is made of the Indonesian military, which not only has its own long record of political violence and murder but also has lengthy associations with

various Islamic extremist groups. Most notoriously, in the 1965-66 CIA-backed coup that brought Suharto to power, rightwing Islamic thugs worked alongside the military in butchering an estimated 500,000 workers, poor farmers and Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) activists.

Suharto and the military had a hand in the initial organisation of what was called Komando Jihad, or Jemaah Islamiyah, in the 1970s. In an effort to undermine a vote for the Muslim-based Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), General Ali Moertopo, who was in charge of Suharto's covert operations, reactivated Islamic extremist elements who had been suppressed under the previous president Sukarno. While the military later cracked down on the grouping, the operation provided a significant impetus to Bashir and others in the forging of the Ngruki network.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the military became actively involved with Islamic groups, such as Laskar Jihad, in fueling communal tensions. The TNI has deliberately fostered instability as a means of justifying its role in internal security and clinging on to the political power and vast economic interests built up over decades under the Suharto dictatorship. And it has not hesitated to use the most ruthless methods. In 1999 in East Timor, TNI-backed militia unleashed a wave of killings against pro-independence supporters.

Four Corners cited two intelligence reports claiming that Faruq told the CIA that Bashir had authorised the purchase of three tonnes of explosives to attack US warships in Indonesia. "One account says he bought them from the Indonesian armed forces, the TNI, the other that he bought them from a former TNI officer," Neighbour explained. But she did not explore the obvious question: if that is the case, what are the TNI's connections to Bashir and JI, and what has been its involvement in other plots—including the Bali bombing?

The military certainly had the means and ample motives for carrying out the Bali attack. The TNI, or sections of it, could have set the operation in motion in a bid to destabilise the Megawati administration, bolster their own security role and justify closer links with the US military—all in the name of "the war on terrorism". Or the country's extensive intelligence networks, which are still controlled by the military, may have been aware that a plot was being prepared and allowed it to proceed for the same reasons.

Taken as a whole—that is, what was omitted as well as what was included—"The Network" meshed completely with the political agenda of the Howard government, both in Indonesia and at home.

The program's willingness to indict JI and ignore the TNI lines up with a renewed push by the Howard government to reestablish close links with the Indonesian military, including its notorious Kopassus special forces. The move is part of broader plans by the US, with the backing of Australia, to exploit the "war on terrorism" to strengthen its strategic presence in South East Asia.

Four Corners is completely silent on the responsibility of the Howard government, let alone the Bush administration, in creating the fertile soil for terrorism. If Al Qaeda and JI are able to gain a hearing in Indonesia and elsewhere, it is because of the widespread public hostility and anger that has been engendered by Washington's reckless policies in Central Asia and the Middle East, including the invasion of Afghanistan and impeding war against Iraq, and Canberra's slavish support for them.

Moreover, "The Network's" utter indifference to the methods used to detain and interrogate Faruq and others legitimises the police state measures employed by the US, Malaysian, Singaporean and Indonesian authorities as well as by federal and state governments in Australia. In its efforts to stampede public opinion behind the "war on terrorism, *Four Corners* has jettisoned the basic principles of serious journalism and, like the rest of the media, lined up with the ongoing onslaught on democratic rights.



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