

Australian-Indonesian families protest ASIO raids

"We are making a public statement that we have nothing to hide"

Terry Cook
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Members of six Indonesian-born Muslim families and their supporters staged a protest outside Kirribilli House, the official residence of Prime Minister John Howard, on November 3 to protest the military-style raids on their homes last week by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Australian Federal Police.

ASIO conducted raids in at least three Australian cities—Sydney, Melbourne and Perth—on the pretext that it is investigating connections with terrorism. But the only accusation so far leveled against those raided is that they attended lectures given by, or had contact in the early 1990s with, Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir. Bashir is reputed to be the leader of an allegedly terrorist organisation, Jemaah Islamiah (JI), which was proscribed by the Howard government just before the first raids on Sunday October 27.

In light of the media witch-hunt that has accompanied the raids, the protest at Kirribilli House was a courageous act designed to demonstrate to the Australian people that the families involved had no connection with terrorism. More than 50 people, including several young children, participated.

The families' legal representative, Stephen Hopper, organised the demonstration. He told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the point was to show that "these people have nothing to hide" and that they had been more than willing to cooperate with the authorities in their inquiries. "The families decided to do what ASIO did to them and pay an unexpected and uninvited call on the prime minister's home. Their visit, however, was much more peaceful and orderly than ASIO's have been," Hopper said. "These are peaceful people."

Hopper condemned the raids as "racial profiling" and a "fishing expedition". "The only things that were in the possession of my clients that may have been of any use to the ASIO inquiry were video tapes of the cleric [Abu Bakar Bashir] speaking at meetings. ASIO, however, could have got these by simply asking. There was no need to conduct armed raids and bash in doors. They would have given them freely.

"The government should review the worth of such operations. I believe there have been 40 raids carried out in Australia since the September 11 attack in the US. There have been no arrests or any significant information gathered."

Jaya Basri, a 30-year-old screen printer from Sydney, attended the protest. Armed officials raided his house on the evening of October 27, while he was vacuuming. The home of his father, Ali Basri, was raided three days later.

Jaya Basri said he heard a knock on the door and looked out to see three men pointing guns and another with a sledgehammer. He asked them to wait while he put on a T-shirt, but they demanded he open the door immediately. His wife Zahra, his four-year-old daughter and seven-month-old son were at home at the time. Basri said the raid had "badly affected his family and had "terrified" his wife and young daughter.

Following the Kirribilli House protest, Basri spoke to WSWs about his reasons for participating: "We wanted to show John Howard we were willing to come and talk to him and there was no need to send armed officers to our homes to scare our families. We were making a public statement that we had nothing to hide. We do not support terrorist organisations inside or outside Australia and we will fully cooperate with the

government in their inquiries. They only had to ask.

“We also held the protest because we are worried that a public impression is being deliberately created that, should an incident happen in Australia, we would be automatically blamed and arrested.”

Basri referred to the way the media had used his photograph to imply he had connections with terrorism. On October 31, the *Daily Telegraph* published a photograph of Basri and his family on a page directly opposite a photograph of an Indonesian official holding up a sketch of one of the three suspects in the Bali bombing that was released by Indonesian authorities last week. The article was accompanied by a subheading proclaiming, “Photos of bombing suspects released.” Another headline on the same page read: “Risks still high in Australia”.

Basri said the method of reporting had added to his family’s distress. “They [the media] have not directly said we are connected with terrorism but they use my picture in this way. This type of thing is very dangerous for me and my family and could encourage attacks on us, or even attempts on my life.

“We are frightened to go about our ordinary daily business. My family has insisted that I do not take public transport to work anymore and so I am driven there. My children and wife were deeply traumatised by the raids. Now my little daughter becomes frightened whenever I leave the house and says, ‘don’t go out, someone might take you.’

“I can understand there is great concern after the Bali bombing, and I am sorry for the victims and their families. But the tragedy should not be used to get rid of everyone’s rights and to allow the government to do anything it likes. That is why we held the protest.”

Moshen Thalib, a Sydney clothing storeowner and father of six who attended the protest, told the media he had offered to assist ASIO with its investigations. He had provided accommodation to Abu Bakar Bashir during his visits to Australia between 1993 and 1996.

Thalib’s lawyer had called ASIO to make the offer, which ASIO declined. Two days later, ASIO agents raided his home at six o’clock in the morning. “I invited them in and tried to be nice,” Thalib said. “I told them I had a video of Abu Bakar Bashir and they could have it.” The agents seized two computers, 12 bags of documents and a mobile phone.

Thalib said Bashir was against the Suharto

government but never preached violent overthrow or terrorism. “I never heard him mention JI.” He went on to explain that, after marrying in 1996 he lost contact with Bashir.

Despite Sunday’s protest and offers of cooperation, the government has made clear it will continue its harassment of Indonesian Muslims. Speaking on ABC television after the demonstration, Federal Attorney General Daryl Williams declared that the raids had “proved worthwhile” and that the “operation” would continue.

Prime Minister Howard defended ASIO’s violent tactics in an address to the Armenian Holy Church last weekend. The raids were “carried out under Australian law,” he argued, maintaining, however, that the government was not targeting Indonesians or Muslims. In any case, he said “only a small number of raids have occurred—less than ten.” This claim is patently false. As the Kirribilli House demonstration revealed, at least six families were raided in Sydney alone, while the total number in Sydney, Perth and Melbourne remains undisclosed.



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