

Washington and Canberra seize on Jakarta bombing to further justify “war on terror”

Peter Symonds
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At least 14 people are dead and almost 150 injured after the blast from a large car bomb ripped through the ground floor of the luxury JB Marriott Hotel and surrounding buildings in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta at lunchtime on Tuesday. Those killed include two taxi drivers, hotel employees and a Dutch businessman. Not all of the bodies, some of which were severely burnt, have been identified.

Foreign politicians, businessmen and diplomats frequently use the 33-storey hotel, part of a US-owned chain. Much of its lobby was destroyed in the explosion, which also damaged the nearby Sailendra Restaurant and adjacent Plaza Mutiari buildings that house several foreign embassies. The bomb left a crater two metres in diameter, pierced through to the parking lot in the basement of the hotel, blew out windows and incinerated cars parked in the area.

At this stage it is not clear who was responsible. But this brutal murder of innocent people is a profoundly reactionary act, which will be seized upon by Jakarta to bolster its repressive apparatus and by Washington and its allies as a pretext for the “global war on terrorism”.

Within 24 hours, the Indonesian government announced plans to step up security measures throughout the country. Their anti-democratic character was indicated by top security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who declared on Tuesday that people should be prepared to accept drastic new limits on their civil rights. “The government will impose these restrictions as we are determined to prevent the deaths of more victims,” he said. “Their lives are worth more than the price of human rights.”

Yudhoyono, a retired army general, told a press conference on Wednesday that hotels and public buildings would be required to implement new security procedures, which may be subject to government checks. He also foreshadowed stepped up efforts by intelligence, police and immigration officials to detect and track down suspected terrorists.

The Indonesian press joined the chorus demanding tougher police measures. The *Jakarta Post* blamed “a sense of complacency on the police’s part” and the government’s “laid-back attitude to the threat of terrorism” for hurting the country’s reputation. The Indonesian currency and share prices fell in the aftermath of the bombing. The *Berita Kota* called for

an immediate review of security procedures. “There are grounds to question the performance of the heads of the Jakarta military and police command and their failure to safeguard the capital from bomb threats,” it stated.

Washington and Canberra immediately condemned the bombing and pointed the finger at the Islamic fundamentalist organisation Jemaah Islamiah (JI), which was allegedly responsible for the Bali bombings in October 2002. President Bush declared that the attack was another reminder that “we are still waging a global war on terrorism.” Australian Prime Minister John Howard said, “it’s yet another reminder that the fight against Jemaah Islamiah and other groups goes on and it is a fight that takes years and it will require the cooperation of all the agencies in the region”.

Both the US and Australia have exploited the Bali bombing to cement what amounts to a permanent police and intelligence presence in Indonesia. Australian police officials were still in the country at the time of the Marriott blast and other federal and state experts are due to arrive in Jakarta, bringing the number to at least 24. The US has also offered to provide direct assistance to Indonesia.

The international media has focussed attention exclusively on JI as the perpetrator of the attack. The only “evidence” offered has been the supposed similarity to the Bali bombing—in both cases car bombs were involved—and the timing. Alleged JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir is currently on trial in Jakarta and the verdict in the first of the Bali bombing trials, that of Amrozi bin Nurhasyim, is due today.

The *Straits Times* published comments allegedly from an anonymous JI member claiming responsibility for the Jakarta hotel attack. The statement warned of further terrorist attacks if “they execute any of our Muslim brothers”. It is yet to be verified or corroborated.

An editorial in Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper on Wednesday concluded that the case against JI was open and shut. “Their target was a hotel favoured by Westerners, Prime Minister Howard was a recent guest and the attack took place just days before Bali bomber Amrozi is to be sentenced... There are no new lessons to learn from this attack—only confirmation of those provided by the attack on the Twin Towers [New York] and last October’s Bali atrocity.”

So far, investigators have identified the van involved but have not yet traced its owner. It also appears that the bomb was a mixture of low and high explosives, including the military explosive RDX, and was detonated by mobile phone. At a press conference yesterday, Indonesia's chief of detectives Erwin Mappaseng noted the superficial similarities to the Bali bombings but added that it was too early to conclude that a definite link existed.

If the culprit was JI, there are a number of unanswered questions. How were the bombers able to obtain military explosives such as RDX? Where did they get the finances for such a major attack? How were they able to evade Indonesia's extensive military intelligence network? The Asian editor of the *Washington Strategic Affairs* journal, Kerry Collison, remarked: "Now this car bombing, although it does have the fingerprints or hallmarks of what happened in Bali, it really smacks of military involvement because you can't move that amount of TNT explosives around Jakarta."

Further questions were raised by the comments of Indonesian police spokesman Prasetyo yesterday. He told the media that the police had seized a number of documents in a raid in Semarang in Central Java three weeks ago, along with several JI suspects and a large quantity of explosives, detonators and ammunition. "In the documents there were some strategic areas including the location of the Marriott," Prasetyo said.

If that is the case, was the hotel management informed? Why were no official warnings made? And most importantly, what was done to prevent such an attack?

The media has excluded other organisations with the expertise and motive to carry out the hotel bombing. These include the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which has been the target of more than two months of bloody military repression in Aceh—backed by Washington and Canberra. Collison commented that it would be wrong to immediately conclude that JI was responsible. "The Acehnese in the last six months have been throwing grenades around Jakarta, bringing the war to let's say Jakarta and the world has not sat up and paid any attention," he explained.

Moreover, if the timing of court proceedings is relevant, then the case of Major General Adam Damari is also worthy of attention. On the day of the Marriott bombing, Damari was sentenced to three years jail for "gross human rights violations" for his role as TNI commander in East Timor during the widespread military-backed militia violence against supporters of East Timorese independence in 1999. Sections of the military have been openly hostile to the proceedings of the special human rights court, which was established under pressure from Washington.

In terms of expertise and motive, the TNI, which is notorious for its violent provocations, is a definite suspect. Seven Kopassus special forces soldiers were found guilty in April of murdering Papuan leader Theys Eluay in November 2001 and evidence points to the involvement of the military in the attack

near the US Freeport-McMoRan mine in Papua last August, which resulted in the deaths of two American teachers. In the latter case, the military immediately blamed separatist rebels in a bid to secure the support of Jakarta and Washington for a campaign of repression in the province.

Even if JI or another Islamic fundamentalist militia did carry out the Marriott Hotel bombing, the responsibility for this atrocity rests, in the final analysis, with the policies of Washington and its allies, including the Indonesian government. The Bush administration's "war on terrorism," its military intervention into Afghanistan and illegal occupation of Iraq and its support for the repressive measures of Jakarta have generated widespread hostility, which various Islamic extremist groups have been able to exploit.

Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Kelty inadvertently alluded to this when he declared yesterday that there was an "almost endless supply" of people in Indonesia willing to become terrorists and that any long-term solution required action at a social level. He then went on to lay the blame on Islamic schools run by figures like the alleged JI leader Bashir, presumably as the precursor to shutting them down.

It is precisely such repression, orchestrated for decades under the Suharto military dictatorship, that has been a central element in cultivating the ground for Islamic extremism in Indonesia. Washington was not only involved in installing and backing Suharto but also directly encouraged Islamic militancy. Some of the key figures accused by the US of organising terrorist attacks in South East Asia trace their roots to the CIA-backed Islamic militia that fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

This latest atrocity will be utilised by both the Bush administration and the Howard government to further prosecute the "global war on terrorism" and to deepen their attacks on democratic rights at home.



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