

The political origins and outlook of Jemaah Islamiyah

Part 1

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If asked the question: “What is Jemaah Islamiyah?” just 18 months ago, most people would have been unable to reply. But since the Bali bombings in October 2002, “JI” has become a virtual household word, synonymous with Islamic extremism and terrorist violence throughout South East Asia. Despite its notoriety, however, almost nothing of any genuine substance has been written on the organisation.

During the past year, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has seized on JI’s alleged activities as further justification of his support for the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” and the US-led occupation of Iraq. JI has also become the pretext for the renewal of Australia’s neo-colonial ambitions within the South Pacific region and for the Howard government’s assault on democratic rights and civil liberties at home.

The Australian media, particularly Murdoch’s publications, have deliberately worked to create a climate of fear, suspicion and uncertainty in the aftermath of the Bali attack. Coverage of the investigation and trials has been uniformly sensationalist and at times openly racist. Warnings of new “terrorist” plots and threats are constantly made, drawn largely from uncorroborated and unnamed police and intelligence sources.

In Indonesia a different, though no less distorted, view of JI prevails. There is widespread and entirely legitimate opposition to the US-led wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, many people are deeply concerned that, in the name of fighting JI, the military is reasserting its authority while fundamental democratic rights are being undermined—with the open backing of Washington and Canberra.

As a result, ordinary Indonesians are deeply suspicious of US and Australian motives, highly critical of the claims being made about JI and willing to believe conspiracy theories about the Bali bombings and other terrorist atrocities. Such sentiments are compounded by the nebulous character of JI, an organisation that issues no statements,

publishes no documents and has never formulated a political program.

Even the name “Jemaah Islamiyah,” meaning “Islamic Community,” evokes controversy. An attack on JI can be taken as an attack on the majority of the Indonesian population. Blaming JI for Bali would be, for many, like accusing the “Christian Community” in the US of the Oklahoma bombing or the “Hindu Community” in India for the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque. This is why, according to International Crisis Group (ICG) analyst Sidney Jones “Less than half of the Indonesian population is willing to believe that JI even exists.”

Jemaah Islamiyah, however, certainly does exist. There is ample evidence from a variety of sources that JI was formally established in the early 1990s by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir during their exile in Malaysia. It is closely connected to a small number of Islamic extremist schools in Indonesia, most notably, Bashir’s school at the village of Ngruki near Solo in Central Java. Thus JI is sometimes referred to as the Ngruki network.

Notwithstanding their politically motivated and legally flawed character, the Bali court cases have revealed that JI was definitely involved in the terror bombings. The four men who have so far been convicted have had lengthy associations with the organisation. One turned state’s evidence, admitted his involvement and expressed remorse. The other three, while retracting their original statements, nevertheless acknowledged playing some part in the bombings and openly applauded the horrific results.

Most of the allegations about JI’s terrorist activities have never been tested in court. Their source is some 200 “JI suspects” being detained in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Many of these men have been held for months—and even years—without trial, in flagrant breach of their basic democratic and legal rights. In some cases, the information has been extracted through psychological and physical torture. As a

consequence, a lot of it is so tainted it would be thrown out as inadmissible in most courts.

The media's incessant focus on JI's terrorist methods serves to confuse the essential questions. Historically, a wide and disparate array of organisations and groups, with wildly differing objectives, have resorted to terrorism. Like them, Jemaah Islamiyah has a definite political perspective. Only by examining its origins, history and outlook can one understand why it has emerged, what interests it serves and to whom it makes its appeal.

The undeniable ideological leaders of JI have been Bashir and, before his death in 1999, Sungkar. While publishing no formal political documents, the two men spent decades elaborating a reactionary fundamentalist outlook that justified violent attacks on "enemies" of Islam.

Immediately striking are the ideological parallels between JI and its declared mortal enemy—the current US administration. Making the obvious terminological allowances, the ignorant and backward view of the world used by Bashir and Sungkar to justify their "defence of Islam" through acts of terror is remarkably similar to the outlook of Bush and his fellow gangsters in the White House.

In the name of defending "civilisation" against an "axis of evil," Bush has enunciated a doctrine of "preemptive strikes" and launched illegal military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Likewise Bashir and Sungkar proclaim an irreconcilable conflict between "good" and "evil"—between the "followers of Allah" and the "followers of Satan"—to justify "jihad" [literally, struggle] in defence of the world's Muslims.

Like religious fanatics everywhere, JI ascribes every social problem to immorality. Unemployment, poverty, inflation, high taxes, poor crops and generalised social chaos are all put down to loose sexual morals, the consumption of alcohol, hedonism, inappropriate dress and the failure to work hard and pray five times a day in the direction of Mecca. Such a list, *mutatis mutandis*, would not be out of place in a gathering of rightwing Christian fundamentalists in the US—the social base of the Bush administration. Likewise, JI's solution to these social ills—the imposition of sharia [Islamic] law with its barbaric punishments—has much in common with the demands of the US rightwing for law-and-order, "family values" and state executions.

New Zealand academic Tim Behrend summed up Bashir's teachings: "With the exception of his ideas of Islamic moral and civilisational superiority and racially tainted theories of international politics, the preponderance of Bashir's teachings are eminently moral... For Bashir, the current environment is far too permissive in general, and fatally

flawed by its establishment on *kafir* principles, including popular democracy, a usurious banking system, social equality of the sexes, and licensing of immoral (and culturally unacceptable) behaviour for economic gain" [*Reading Past the Myth: The Public Teachings of Abu Bakar Bashir*, February 2003, p.7].

In 1999, following their return to Indonesia from exile, Bashir and Sungkar issued a tract entitled "The Latest Indonesian Crisis: Causes and Solutions". Couched in crude anti-Semitic and racist terms, and directed against "Kaffir Dutch," "Mushrik Japanese," and "Kaffir Chinese and Christians," it blamed the last century of oppression in Indonesia on the lack of an Islamic state. All the evils that flowed from the Asian financial crisis were "a form of Kufr [punishment] due to our neglect of the blessings of Allah." No accommodation with the existing state of affairs was possible. There were just two alternatives for any Muslim: life in an Islamic state implementing the sharia, or death striving to achieve it.

Such views are not merely quaint or eccentric, but deeply reactionary in the strict scientific meaning of the word. JI is irreconcilably hostile to the secular state and to basic democratic rights. Its ideal is a throwback to a largely mythological past, in which feudalistic social relations—between master and servant; cleric and congregation, and husband and wife—are governed by a fixed, preordained and unchallengeable social code, justified by religion and backed by brutal retributive punishment.

In no sense does JI defend or represent the interests of the working class and oppressed masses. Its program and perspective articulate the economic and social aspirations of a backward layer of the Indonesian capitalist class, which regards Islam as a useful tool for gaining access to the privileges and profits it feels it has been denied. At the same time, it promotes communalism and religious bigotry in order to keep working people ignorant and divided, thus preventing any challenge from below.

To be continued



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