

The political origins and outlook of Jemaah Islamiyah

Part 2

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Below we are publishing the second in a three-part series on Jemaah Islamiyah. Part 1 was published on November 12 and the final section will be published tomorrow.

In twenty-first century Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah is the most extreme expression of a rightwing Islamist current that traces its roots to the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of returning to a purified Islam—the religion of the prophet and his followers—first emerged in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century. It was later transplanted to Indonesia as the response of a section of the emerging bourgeoisie to colonial domination. What became known as “Modernist Islam” eclectically combined a religious revival with an attempt to incorporate advances in modern science and technology.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Modernist Islam was a diffuse anti-colonial movement that attracted both workers and layers of the urban middle class. It made little headway in rural areas, where the majority continued to adhere to a hybrid form of Islam, including elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and animism. Its more progressive elements were drawn, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, to the emerging nationalist movement and to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

By the time of World War II, Modernist Islam had been reduced to a rightwing rump, with a base among the more conservative elements of the urban petty bourgeoisie. These social layers felt oppressed by Indonesia’s Dutch colonial rulers and bitter about the privileged positions of Javanese aristocrats and Chinese entrepreneurs. At the same time, they were deeply hostile to the PKI and the threat posed by the emerging working class.

After the war, Masyumi, an organisation formed under the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, emerged as the main Modernist Islam party. It was antagonistic both to the PKI and to President Sukarno, a secular nationalist who had opposed the attempts of various Islamic parties and organisations to include sharia law in the country’s constitution. Masyumi’s opposition intensified as Sukarno increasingly turned to the PKI to control growing discontent among the masses, while manoeuvring with the Stalinist regime in Beijing to gain political and financial support. After some of its leaders participated in a short-lived CIA-backed rebel government on the island of Sumatra in 1958-59, Masyumi was banned.

In the 1940s, Masyumi politician-turned-cleric S.M. Kartosuwirjo founded the Darul Islam movement, the most extreme opponents of Sukarno. In August 1949, Kartosuwirjo proclaimed his own Indonesian Islamic State (NII) in opposition to the newly formed Indonesian Republic headed by Sukarno, linking up with regional revolts in Aceh and South Sulawesi. Darul Islam militia fought a long-running war of attrition against Jakarta in which an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people died. The rebellion was only finally crushed in 1962, following the capture and execution of Kartosuwirjo.

All the Islamic organisations, including Masyumi and the underground

remnants of Darul Islam, enthusiastically backed the CIA-orchestrated coup in 1965-66 that installed the Suharto dictatorship, and participated in the subsequent massacre of an estimated 500,000 PKI members, workers and villagers. Darul Islam veterans were reportedly directly involved in the murder of estate workers in the Subang district of West Java.

According to Dutch academic Martin van Bruinessen: “It is widely believed that the powerful intelligence chief Ali Murtopo—who became Suharto’s chief adviser in his first decade as president, and who is rightly considered as the real architect of Indonesia’s New Order—cultivated a group of Darul Islam veterans and allowed them to maintain a network of contacts as a secret weapon against ‘communism’ and other enemies, that could be unleashed at any convenient moment” [*Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in post-Suharto Indonesia*, July 2002, p.7].

Although Suharto exploited the services of the Islamic parties to come to power, he was not about to implement their demands for sharia law, or cede significant economic and political power to the narrow social layers they represented. Like his predecessor, Suharto was the political instrument of dominant sections of the Indonesian bourgeoisie who backed the military junta as the means for crushing radicalised layers of the working class and peasantry, which Sukarno had proven incapable of controlling.

Suharto’s refusal to implement Masyumi’s demands provoked two main responses. Some of Masyumi’s leaders and sections of its associated student group—the Muslim Student’s Association (HMI)—openly joined Golkar, the junta’s political instrument, in line with their support for Suharto’s anti-communism. But others continued to insist on establishing an Islamic state, and they turned in other directions.

The most prominent of this group formed the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), ostensibly devoted to Islamic proselytising rather than to politics. DDII oriented towards the Middle East and found both ideological and financial support in Saudi Arabia. In 1962, the Saudi regime established the Islamic World League as a vehicle for its own brand of Islamic fundamentalism—Wahhabism—to prop up its autocratic state against the impact of radical bourgeois nationalism. The DDII became the League’s main partner in Indonesia, and former Masyumi leader Mohammad Natsir one of its vice-chairmen.

Sungkar and Bashir were two of the more extreme elements associated with Masyumi/DDII. They drew their inspiration from the Darul Islam rebellion and both had strong links to Modernist Islam. Both men were born in Java in the 1930s and educated in Modernist schools. In the 1950s, they became leaders in Gerakan Pemuda Islam Indonesia (GPII)—a student group connected to Masyumi. Sungkar and Bashir met and began collaborating in 1963.

For obvious reasons, the two men remained cautious about publicly admitting their connections to the underground movement. But there is no

doubt they were in contact with Darul Islam and supported its militant armed struggle for an Islamic state. In a 1997 interview with the Australian-based Islamic student magazine *Nida'ul Islam*, Sungkar hailed Kartosuwirjo, directly traced JI's origins to Darul Islam and proclaimed jihad, including Quwwatul Musallaha (military strength), as central to his organisation's struggle against the Suharto regime.

Following the 1965-66 coup, Sungkar, who was chairman of the DDII Central Java branch, and Bashir began openly campaigning for an Islamic state. The two established a radio station in Solo in 1967 and an Islamic school in 1971, which moved to its present location in the village of Ngruki two years later. They increasingly ran foul of the Suharto junta for their refusal to acknowledge the secular state and its ideology of Pancasila (literally, five principles: Belief in God, Justice, Nationalism, Democracy, Social Justice).

The internal security apparatus shut down the radio station in 1975 for its anti-government propaganda. In 1977 Sungkar was detained for six weeks for urging people not to vote in national elections.

Both Sungkar and Bashir were arrested in November 1978 and charged over their connections to Haji Ismail Pranoto—a senior Darul Islam commander in West Java—and an armed group variously described in court as Komando Jihad or Jemaah Islamiyah. The whole affair underscored the degree to which the US-backed Suharto junta was able to manipulate rightwing Islamic groups for its own purposes. Whatever their differences with Suharto and the military, these religious extremists shared an organic class hostility to the working class and to anything remotely associated with socialism and Marxism—even in the politically degenerate form of the Stalinist PKI.

By the late 1970s, Suharto and the military were increasingly concerned about rightwing Islamic organisations becoming a channel for political opposition. According to an International Crisis Group (ICG) report, intelligence chief Murtopo conceived of an elaborate sting operation using his contacts with the Darul Islam movement. The intelligence agency BAKIN actively encouraged the formation of an armed militia—Komando Jihad—claiming it was necessary to combat the dangers of a communist revival following the US defeat in Vietnam in 1975. Its real purpose, however, was to identify and trap Islamic militants and to politically discredit Islamic political parties and organisations.

In mid-1979, the security apparatus rounded up some 185 people, including alleged Komando Jihad leaders—Pranoto and Haji Danu Mohamad Hasan. The latter blurted out in court that he had been recruited by BAKIN. He claimed the army had instructed him to call upon former Darul Islam members to counter the communist threat. Sungkar and Bashir, who were detained the following year, appear to have been among those netted in Murtopo's operation. Sungkar admitted in court to meeting Pranoto, but denied taking any oath to Darul Islam. Pranoto was never brought before the court and the government's case rested almost entirely on public anti-government statements made by Sungkar and Bashir.

The exact nature of their activities at this time remains vague, as does the organisation to which they belonged. As the ICG explained: "At the end of 1979, it remained unclear whether Jemaah Islamiyah was a construct of the government, a revival of Darul Islam, an amorphous gathering of like-minded Muslims or a structured organisation led by Sungkar and Bashir. To some extent, it was all of the above, and the name seems to have meant different things to different people" [*Al Qaeda in South East Asia: the case of the 'Ngruki Network' in Indonesia*, August 2002, p.8].

Bashir and Sungkar were found guilty and sentenced to nine years jail. But they were released in 1982, less than three years later, after the term was reduced on appeal. In 1985, when Indonesia's Supreme Court overturned the appeals court decision and reimposed the original sentence, the two fled into exile in Malaysia, where they remained until 1999.

Sungkar and Bashir might have remained just two more aging

Indonesian exiles, fulminating and plotting against Suharto, were it not for the activities of the Reagan administration in Washington. The CIA was just about to intensify its largest ever "covert" operation—fomenting a "holy war" against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan—by recruiting an international brigade of Islamic extremists to join the war.

Washington's aim of bogging the Soviet army in an unwinnable guerrilla war coincided with the interests of numbers of politically reactionary forces. Pakistani dictator General Zia ul Haq eagerly offered his country as a base, in order to garner US support and bolster his Islamic credentials. The Saudi regime matched Washington's billions with its own money as means of countering the challenge posed by Iran, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and of lifting its flagging political stocks at home. All sorts of extremist groups rallied to the Afghan jihad as a way of getting money, arms, training and enhancing their reputations.

From their base in Malaysia, Sungkar and Bashir seized the opportunity with both hands. Theirs was certainly not the only group to provide recruits for the "holy war". But the two men appear to have had the inside running when it came to getting money and support from Saudi Arabia. Their connections with DDII, and through it to the Islamic World League, seem to have paid off. Dutch academic Van Bruinessen explains: "According to sources close to the Usrah movement [identified with Bashir and Sungkar], a Saudi recruiting officer visited Indonesia in 1984 or 1985 and identified Sungkar's and another Darul Islam-related group as the only firm and disciplined Islamic communities (jama'ah) capable of jihad" [*The violent fringes of Indonesia's radical Islam*, December 2002, p.5].

A recent ICG report entitled *Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but still Dangerous* estimates that more than 200 men associated with the JI network were sent to Afghanistan. In most cases, the Islamic World League paid their expenses. All of them were trained at the military camps run by the Mujaheddin faction led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Sayyaf, a proponent of strict Wahhabi Islam, had extremely close links to Saudi Arabia and its logistics operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which were run by Osama bin Laden, among others.

Suharto's crackdown on Islamic organisations in the 1980s helped provide Sungkar and Bashir with a steady stream of recruits. With a view to establishing his own military organisation, Sungkar deliberately selected the better educated. Those who completed the full course in Sayyaf's camps received three years of rigorous military and ideological training. The Indonesians were grouped together with Thais, Malaysians and Filipinos and thus made important contacts with other Islamic extremist groups in the region—in particular, the Filipino separatist militia, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the breakaway Abu Sayyaf group.

Media accounts describing Jemaah Islamiyah as the outcome of some inexplicable Machiavellian plot are simply absurd. Without the CIA's dirty operations in Afghanistan, neither Jemaah Islamiyah nor Al Qaeda would have come into existence. The anti-Soviet war provided the money and the training, as well as forging the loose international network of contacts that was to characterise the future modus operandi of these organisations. It also provided participants with powerful new credentials. Upon their return to South East Asia, Washington's "freedom fighters" were treated as heroes within Islamic circles. In Indonesia, they even formed their own veteran organisation—Group 272—the figure being the number of former fighters.

As the ICG explained: "All of JI's top leaders and many of the men involved in JI bombings trained in Afghanistan over a ten-year period, 1985-95. The jihad in Afghanistan had a huge influence in shaping their worldview, reinforcing their commitment to jihad, and providing them with lethal skills... It is important to note that the process of sending recruits to Afghanistan began at least seven years before JI formally came into being. In many ways, the emergence of a formal organisation around

1992 merely institutionalised a network that already existed” [*Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but still Dangerous*, August 2003, p.2].

How the United States’ key assets of the 1980s became anti-American terrorists in the 1990s is, above all, a political issue. Just as in the 1960s, when the CIA and the Indonesian military exploited Islamic factions to carry out the mass murder of workers and communists, the operation in Afghanistan was a marriage of convenience. It began to fall apart once the Soviet Union collapsed, followed by its puppet regime in Kabul in 1992. Those who collaborated in the anti-Soviet “jihad” represented dissident sections of the bourgeoisie of a number of countries, whose class interests happened to coincide with those of Washington during the Afghan war. Once the war was over, their interests began to diverge.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* article “What is bin Ladenism?” explained: Al Qaeda “is not a political movement of disoriented freedom fighters that somehow expresses the strivings of oppressed but politically confused masses. In both his political views and his activities, bin Laden reflects a dissident and disaffected section of the national bourgeoisie in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East generally. This privileged social layer feels that it has not been treated fairly in its dealings with imperialism and chafes at the limitations imposed on its own ambitions.”

The shift in bin Laden’s attitude to Washington began during the US-led Gulf War in 1990-91. He had no objection to the murderous military assault on the Iraqi people or the Baathist regime, which he opposed because of its secular character. What bin Laden opposed was the stationing of “infidel” American troops in the land of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He articulated the sentiments of layers of the ruling elite in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East, who felt the Saudi regime was subordinating their interests too directly to Washington.

Exactly when, how and, indeed, if a final complete rupture took place between Washington and its former Islamist allies has never been made clear. In 1993-94, the United States tacitly backed the establishment of the Taliban militia in Afghanistan by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, as a means of imposing order in the country and enabling the building of lucrative oil and gas pipelines into the former Soviet Central Asia. The US has also maintained a highly ambivalent attitude to the activities of Afghan veterans in Chechnya and western China—never quite sure whether to hail them as freedom fighters or denounce them as terrorists. But either directly, or indirectly through Pakistani and Saudi intelligence, the CIA undoubtedly retained contacts with its Afghan “assets” long after the end of the Afghan war.



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