The political origins and outlook of Jemaah Islamiyah

Part 3

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Below we are publishing the concluding section of a three-part series on Jemaah Islamiyah. Part 1 *was posted on November 12 and* Part 2 *on November 13.*

In South East Asia, the network created by the Afghan War drew Islamic extremist groups closer together—a process that appears to have been facilitated by the presence of Al Qaeda figures in the Philippines. Sometime in 1993, Sungkar and Bashir founded Jemaah Islamiyah. As a result of their lengthy exile, they had already established many contacts in Malaysia and Singapore. JI members had, for example, forged ties with the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) in the Philippines—using its bases for military training instead of the increasingly difficult alternative in Afghanistan.

Inside Indonesia, Suharto was making a conscious effort to enlist the support of various Islamist groups as a prop for his increasingly fragile regime. In the early 1990s he made an ostentatious pilgrimage to Mecca and established the Indonesian Association of Islamic Intellectuals (ICMI), under the leadership of his close ally B.J. Habibie. The ICMI was permitted to publish its own daily newspaper *Republika.* Other concessions included proportionate representation for Muslims in the state bureaucracy and the military, the setting up of an Islamic bank and legislation to enhance the status of Islamic courts.

Suharto's tactical manoeuvres quickly bore fruit. Hardline DDII leaders fell in behind him, becoming prominent in the formation of KISMI, the Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the World of Islam. KISMI had close links to Suharto—through his son-in-law, General Prabowo Subianto—and became a platform for championing "Islamic causes" such as the oppression of Muslims in Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya and Algeria. While Bashir and Sungkar remained in exile, continuing to oppose Suharto, the new climate was certainly conducive to JI's politics.

The crucial turning point in JI's evolution came in 1997-98 with the Asian financial crisis—an economic meltdown that served to exacerbate social and political tensions throughout the region. In Indonesia, the value of the rupiah plummetted, businesses were bankrupted and the debt-laden financial system was brought to the brink of collapse. Levels of poverty and unemployment rose sharply. The US and the IMF further compounded the economic and social turmoil by insisting that Suharto implement far-reaching restructuring measures.

Suharto's position rapidly became untenable. Unwilling to comply with IMF demands that threatened his monopoly of economic and political power, the Indonesian president lost the unconditional backing of Washington. At the same time, he confronted mounting protests, spearheaded by students, who were demanding an end to his 32-year dictatorship, along with measures to arrest falling living standards. Suharto was finally compelled to step down in May 1998 and hand over power to his loyal ally Vice President Habibie.

Significantly, Sungkar, Bashir and JI played no role in the downfall of Suharto. Inside Indonesia, KISMI and other rightwing Islamist groups backed the president to the bitter end. After Suharto was ousted, they threw their support behind Habibie. When, in November 1998, Habibie faced a fresh crisis as he sought to use a special parliamentary session to consolidate his grip on power, KISMI helped organise his defence. It provided most of the 100,000 "volunteers"—thugs armed with batons and knives— who, along with army troops, intimidated and attacked huge protests demanding Habibie's resignation and genuine democratic elections.

But the most critical role in propping up Habibie's regime was played by the bourgeois "reformers"—Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais. At the height of the demonstrations all three agreed to Habibie's limited measures, effectively giving the green light for the violent suppression of the demonstrations.

As the protest movement waned, the military deliberately fomented communal conflict as a means of reasserting its authority. In 1999, the TNI top brass was intimately connected with the wave of terror unleashed by pro-Jakarta militia against pro-independence supporters in East Timor. The army was also deeply involved in the promotion of sectarian violence in the Malukus and Sulewesi in 2000.

In the absence of any progressive alternative aimed at unifying all sections of the Indonesian working class and oppressed masses around the struggle for genuine social equality, JI and other Islamic extremist groups were able to exploit these communal tensions. Sections of the middle class and small business, suddenly bankrupted by the financial crisis, were ready to believe propaganda blaming their new predicament on the corrupting influence of Christians and ethnic Chinese. Young people with

technical or university education and rosy future prospects saw their careers collapse before their eyes. They rapidly became disenchanted with the hollow rhetoric of the "reformers" and disaffected with the state of society as a whole. Some, out of despair and desperation, turned to Islamist groups and militia such as JI.

Moreover, JI's anti-American propaganda found a wider audience. Many Indonesians were angry at Washington's IMF agenda, with its devastating social consequences. In the ensuing five years, that hostility has been further compounded by the Australian-led intervention in East Timor, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and continuing US support for Israel's repression against the Palestinians. All of this has been seized upon by JI as "proof" of an anti-Islamic conspiracy.

Bashir, Sungkar and other JI members returned to Indonesia in 1999 and began expanding their small network of Islamic schools. After Sungkar's death, Bashir assumed the role of ideological leader. He established the Mujaheddin Council of Indonesia (MMI) that included other individuals and groups intent on establishing an Islamic state. In August 2000, MMI held its first congress in Yogyakarta, which was attended by some 1,500 people, including figures such as the chairman of the Justice Party, Hidayat Nur Muhammad. Bashir, who was elected supreme leader, boasted that the body had connections with major Muslim organisations.

The main emphasis at the congress was on moral strictures: the banning of alcohol and the imposition of restrictions on women. But the MMI also recruited its own militia units and dispatched them, with the tacit approval of the military, to take part in communal fighting in the Malukus, which claimed an estimated 5,000 lives. In turn, the Malukus conflict provided JI with new members who had military training and experience, as well as being ideologically committed.

Terrorist bombings began in Indonesia in 1999-2000 and JI has been specifically linked to two. On Christmas Eve 2000, a coordinated series of bomb blasts took place across the country. More than 30 bombs were set to explode at the same time at Christian churches or the homes of clergy in 11 cities in six different provinces. Nineteen people were killed and around 120 were injured. Two years later, the Bali atrocity occurred.

Several of the perpetrators were Afghan veterans who had been recruited via the Bashir-Sungkar network. The ICG report "Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but still Dangerous" provides a long list of the names of trainees and their dates of training at Sayyaf's camps in Afghanistan. The list includes key figures in the 2000 church bombings and the Bali attack. Three of the four men so far convicted in the Bali bombings, for example, served in Afghanistan: Muchlas alias Ali Gufron [1986], Ali Imron [1990] and Abdul Aziz alias Imam Samudra [1991].

But the full story of these terrorist attacks is yet to be told. The most obvious questions—about the role of the Indonesian military—remain unanswered. It is simply not plausible that Indonesia's vast security and intelligence apparatus knew nothing about the large logistical operation involved in the Bali bombings. Yet no investigation has been carried out into precisely what information military officials had prior to the attack. Any leads casting suspicion on the TNI—including the detention of a military officer—have been quickly dropped.

The TNI has a long and sordid history of political thuggery. It also has decades of experience in penetrating and manipulating militia groups and gangs, including Islamic extremist organisations. Earlier this year, six special forces soldiers, including an officer, were convicted over the political assassination of a prominent Papuan leader. Moreover, sections of the military have several motives for staging a spectacular terrorist attack, or allowing one to take place, including creating a justification for greater US military aid and cooperation, which is currently subject to a US Congressional ban.

Bashir's involvement in the Bali attack remains unclear. ICG reports indicate evidence of divisions in JI between Bashir, who appears intent on using the MMI to gain influence with the established parties, and the younger Afghan veterans, who are keen to use their military skills. It is significant that while Bashir has been tried—and acquitted—in relation to the Christmas 2000 bombings, he has never been charged over Bali.

Whether or not he personally planned or authorised the Bali bombings, Bashir bears responsibility for the political perspective that led to the senseless death of 202 innocent people. Any organisation whose members hail such a tragedy as a "victory" has nothing to do with the interests of the working class. JI's vision of a society run by clerics enforcing a mediaeval moral code is irreconcilably opposed to the democratic rights and aspirations of the masses of ordinary working people.

The very emergence of JI, and its ability to make an appeal to significant sections of the Indonesian population, constitutes the most malignant expression of the incapacity of the entire Indonesian ruling elite to offer any solution to the deepening political, social and economic crisis confronting the vast majority of the population. A genuine solution to this crisis, however, lies not in the rise to power of another section of the bourgeoisie, committed to medievalism and Islamic fundamentalism, but the socialist reorganization of society—on the basis of genuine social equality, justice and democracy for all, not just the privileged few. This requires building a new political movement of the working class that will fight to unite all layers of workers and the oppressed masses—in Indonesia, throughout Asia and internationally—in a common struggle against the current economic and social order.

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