

The political issues behind the Jakarta bomb blast

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The reactionary character of Islamist terrorist groups has once again been demonstrated in Thursday's huge bomb blast outside the heavily fortified Australian embassy in Jakarta, indiscriminately killing and injuring innocent people.

At least nine Indonesians, including passers-by and people queuing to enter the embassy, were killed and more than 170 wounded. The only Australian casualty was a five-year-old girl who is now in a critical condition in hospital. Her Indonesian mother died in the explosion. The blast, believed to have been caused by a car bomb detonated near the embassy gates, cut a swathe of devastation in central Jakarta—destroying vehicles, scattering debris and body parts across the road and blowing out the windows of entire office blocks in the surrounding area.

While as yet no one has been arrested in connection with the atrocity, it bears all the hallmarks of Jemaah Islamiyah—the Islamic extremist group responsible for the bombing of the Bali tourist resort in October 2002 that claimed at least 202 lives. The construction of a car bomb and its detonation outside the Australian embassy gates required money, expertise and a large amount of planning. Like the Bali attack, it was a highly professional operation.

A statement in Arabic posted on the Internet claimed responsibility for the bombing, warning of further “painful blows” unless “all Australians get out of Indonesia.... and the Australian government gets out of Iraq.” The statement, which is yet to be corroborated, was issued in the name of “al-Jama'a al-Islamiya in East Asia”, an apparent allusion to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

The reference to the Howard government's support for the criminal US-led occupation of Iraq in no way justifies the slaughter of innocent people in Jakarta—Indonesians, Australians or people of any other nationality. The bombing stands in complete opposition to the development of any genuine and unified struggle against imperialism by deliberately sowing confusion and whipping up nationalist and communal animosities.

The perpetrators' reactionary means are inseparably

connected to their political aims. JI, Al Qaeda and other Islamist terror groups are deeply hostile to the interests of the working class. They comprise a disaffected layer of the bourgeoisie in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere that wants a new accommodation with imperialism, not its overthrow. JI's contempt for the lives of ordinary Indonesians is of a piece with its intention of imposing an anti-democratic, Islamist state throughout the archipelago.

The two chief suspects—Azahiri Hasin and Noordin Mohammad Top—both come from well-off Malaysian families and have connections to JI. Azahiri, who studied engineering in Australia and Britain, was one of a number of Indonesians and Malaysians who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the CIA-backed holy war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. It was there, under the auspices of massive US and Saudi funding, that JI's connections with Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists were established.

The timing of the latest bombing points to several possible motives. It occurred two days before the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US; in the midst of election campaigns in Indonesia, Australia and the US, and just prior to the start of a new trial in Jakarta for alleged JI leader Abu Bakar Bashir. Whatever the intentions behind it, the outcome of the atrocity will be a further bolstering by the Indonesian state of the anti-democratic measures put in place after the Bali bombing, a greater intervention by the armed forces in domestic political affairs, and a strengthening of Jakarta's military ties with Canberra and Washington—all in the name of the “war on terrorism”.

To insist that absolutely nothing progressive can emerge from the Jakarta embassy bombing in no way minimises the criminal role of the Howard government in creating the political climate for organisations such as Al Qaeda and JI to operate. Predictably, the Australian political establishment has responded to Thursday's attack—the first on an identifiably Australian target—by trying to bury any serious discussion of the issues involved.

For his own part, Prime Minister Howard's reaction was

tempered by the fate of the right-wing Aznar government in Spain, following the terrorist bombing in Madrid last March. Aznar had calculated that, in the midst of an election campaign, he could exploit the attack by blaming it, despite evidence to the contrary, on the Basque separatist organisation ETA, thus focusing attention on his government's tough stance against the group.

But the move backfired badly as voters recognised Aznar's stance as yet another lie—on top of the ones used to justify Spain's backing for the widely unpopular invasion of Iraq. Anger over the deception prompted many Spaniards, otherwise disgusted with the policies of both the government and the opposition PSOE socialists, to turn out on polling day and throw Aznar out of office.

The Spanish result had a significant impact on every member of the so-called “coalition of the willing”—including Howard. Like Aznar, he is widely viewed among voters as a compulsive liar who committed Australian troops to the illegal war against Iraq on the basis of lies and deceit. That is why, in response to the Jakarta attack, he could ill afford to be seen as manipulating the tragic events just four weeks out from the Australian federal election.

Instead, Howard confined himself to posturing as the tough statesman, declaring that his government would “not be intimidated” by terrorism. At the same time, he adamantly insisted that it would be “wrong to suggest” that the bombing of the Jakarta embassy rendered a terrorist attack on Australian soil more likely. This was a reference to a controversy last March, when Howard and his ministers publicly upbraided Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty for suggesting, in the wake of the Madrid bombing, that Australia's involvement in the Iraq war increased the likelihood of a terrorist attack in Australia. Under enormous pressure, Keelty was compelled to make a humiliating retraction of what he regarded as an obvious truth: Islamic extremists were exploiting the hostility engendered by the Iraq invasion for their own reactionary purposes.

Neither the Howard government nor the Labor opposition wants to open up this political can of worms. Any discussion of the occupation of Iraq, which is supported by both parties, threatens to rekindle the antiwar opposition that erupted in February 2003 in the largest ever protests and demonstrations in Australia's history. In response to the bombing, Labor leader Mark Latham immediately pledged full support to Howard and deliberately sought to obscure the political issues behind the bombing by declaring that the perpetrators “are evil and barbaric and must be dealt with as harshly as possible”.

There is no question that Thursday's events were terrible and tragic. But even terrible acts have political causes.

Howard's unflinching support for the Bush administration's subjugation of Iraq is just the latest in a series of Australian government policies that have generated widespread anger in Indonesia and throughout the region.

In the wake of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, the Howard government, following Washington, wholeheartedly backed the IMF's aggressive imposition of drastic economic restructuring in Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea that resulted in widespread poverty and hardship. Following the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship, Howard cynically exploited the deepening tensions in Indonesia to justify a military intervention in East Timor, thus securing Australian imperialism's long-held ambitions to control the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves.

The Howard government fuelled further opposition by backing the Bush administration's “war on terrorism” and committing Australian troops to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This was done in order to secure Washington's backing for Australia's own aggressive intervention in the Asia Pacific region, including the virtual takeover of the Solomon Islands and the imposition of Australian officials on other Pacific Island nations. It is little wonder that Canberra is popularly regarded as an imperialist bully that throws its weight around the region with Washington's backing.

If the Australian embassy in Jakarta, and Australians generally, have now become targets for terrorist attack, the Howard government bears direct political responsibility. This is what Howard, with the full complicity of the Labor party and the media, wants to exclude from the public debate.



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