

Widespread unease, opposition as Indonesian government executes Bali bombers

Patrick O'Connor
12 November 2008

News of Indonesia's execution early last Sunday of three men convicted of the 2002 Bali bombings has been met around the world with widespread expressions of unease, concern, and open opposition, including from many family members of the 202 people killed.

In Australia, there was a generally thoughtful and critical response on the part of ordinary people. This stood in marked contrast to the political and media establishment's long record of utilising the Bali bombings to bolster the so-called war on terror by inciting the basest political sentiments and denying the legitimacy of any examination of the social and historical roots of the terrorist attacks.

The state killing of the three bombers was a barbaric act. Amrozi Nurhasyim, Ali Ghufron (Mukhlas), and Imam Samudra were executed by firing squad 15 minutes after midnight on Sunday morning in Nusakambangan's Batu prison on the Indonesian island of Java. With hoods over their heads, they were taken from their cells, driven for 30 minutes to the execution site, and tied to three posts five metres apart. All three reportedly refused to wear blindfolds and shouted "Allah Akbar" (God is great) as they faced their executioners.

Many family members of those killed in the terrorist atrocity six years ago courageously spoke out against the death penalty after the executions.

Adelaide magistrate Brian Deegan, whose 22-year-old son Josh was killed in the blast, has long been an outspoken opponent of capital punishment. He wrote a moving column published in Monday's Melbourne *Herald Sun* and Brisbane's *Courier Mail*. "Josh was my guiding light, now forever dimmed," he wrote. "But my beliefs and my affirmed opposition to the death penalty are not and should not be centred around him. And neither should the media-fuelled debate. Standing beside him [at his grave], I recognised that the first question to be asked is; are we as a nation against capital punishment? If the answer is yes, then that must be the end of any debate."

Gayle Dunn, who lost her 18-year-old son Craig, and Georgia Lysaght, whose brother Scott was killed, told Wollongong's *Illawarra Mercury* that the executions brought them no comfort. "Nothing is ever going to bring them back," Dunn said. "You are never going to see them grow old."

Lysaght added the execution "doesn't bring any sense of closure or relief". She said: "The fact they are executed doesn't change the way

I feel... It doesn't bring my brother back." She also said she hoped people didn't blame the bombings on Asian or Muslim people: "I have a lot of friends who are Asian and Islamic and it is really difficult for people at these times."

Claire Hatton, whose husband Christian Redman was killed, added: "I saw a quote by Mahatma Gandhi and it said: 'The trouble with an eye for an eye is that it makes us all blind'. That's what I think."

Many relatives of those killed and injured spoke of their fears that reprisal terror attacks would claim more lives. "I'm really fearful for other people that are going to have to go through what we've gone through," Sandra Thompson, mother of 29-year-old bombing victim Clint, told the ABC. "How many more people are going to be killed? I would have liked to have seen them left in jail. I would have liked to have seen no media coverage. Just put them in a corner for the rest of their life, just leave them in jail."

The small Islamic fundamentalist group around cleric Abu Bakir Bashir promised there would be retaliation for the three men's deaths. A banner at the cemetery in the East Javan village of Tenggulun, where Amrozi and Mukhlas were buried, read: "Welcome martyrs". Hundreds of fundamentalists attended the funerals, clashing with Indonesian police who delivered the bodies by helicopter from the prison island. In Serang, West Java, Samudra's coffin was paraded through the streets while his family handed out copies of his will, which encouraged more attacks on non-Muslims.

The Australian, US, and other governments issued travel warnings as the executions were being prepared. Several international hotels on Java, as well as the Australian Embassy, received bomb threats on Sunday, though no bombs were found.

A number of Indonesian commentators have expressed their fear that the executions will deliver more disoriented young men into the ranks of the radical Islamists. "The terrorists have been overexposed," Soeryo Winoto, a Jakarta newspaper columnist told *Time* magazine. "What the television stations have been reporting is just free propaganda for the terrorists."

Indonesian intelligence expert Wawan Purwanto stated: "It would have been better to keep them alive for the value of the intelligence they can provide on terrorist networks. Ninety per cent of the information they have has already been obtained; the 10 per cent could still be extracted."

Outstanding questions

Perhaps far more significant than lost opportunities for further knowledge on “terrorist networks” is the fact that the three executions may mean that the full story behind the Bali bombings will never be known. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted, many outstanding questions remain, including whether elements in the Indonesian state or military had a hand in the atrocity. This is something that has never been probed by western governments or the media. Also unexplained is why Australian officials did not publicise the prior intelligence they had received ahead of the bombings.

All these questions were deliberately suppressed in Australia in favour of a deeply reactionary campaign instigated by the media and the major parties. The bombings, the public was told, were simply a manifestation of “evil” and Islamic “medievalism”, vindicating the Howard government’s full participation in the Bush administration’s “war on terror”, including Australia’s partnership in the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The terror attacks were also frequently invoked in defence of the government’s “terror laws”, which effectively junked long-standing democratic rights and legal norms, and formed the sub-text to the former Howard government’s victimisation of Muslim immigrants in Australia.

The public reaction to the three executions on Sunday serves to underscore a developing political shift, of which last November’s electoral defeat of the Howard government was one expression. The entire framework of the fraudulent war on terror is now discredited among broad layers of the population. Certain lessons have been assimilated—from foreign policy debacles in the Middle East, revelations of torture in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, as well as domestic exposures of bogus terror scares, such as the Haneef frame-up.

“When the Bali bombers were executed, an atrocity was punished by an atrocity, and all of us are in some way diminished,” Brian Cade wrote in a letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. “Two wrongs do not make a right. Two atrocities make just that—two atrocities.”

Another letter writer, Mark Lee, said he attended a Steve Earle concert the night before the executions; the singer had asked why the Labor government of Kevin Rudd had remained silent. “We as a nation abandoned the death penalty more than 40 years ago as proof we had become enlightened, and we should not support it in any country, in any way, for any reason,” Lee wrote. “Our silence only makes our complicity even more insidious. I voted for a change of government last year and welcomed it with open arms. Now all I can say is shame on its silence, shame on mine and thank you, Steve Earle.”

Lawry Mahon wrote to the *Age*: “Any moral high ground that Australia may have had with its blanket opposition to capital

punishment drained from the equation as quickly as the blood of the murderers the moments the bullets were fired. Shooting three barbarian fools bandaged no wounds, offered no reassuring words, and made no positive changes to the world. The shootings didn’t make the lives of our frightened politicians and churchmen any better either. While they sat on their hands, real opportunities for change faded with the echoes of the gunshots. I fear for the Australians, as well as every other human, sitting on death row, as now Australia has no right to be heard.”

The Labor government’s tacit support for the Bali bombers’ execution has been widely condemned by those working to save the lives of the three “Bali Nine” members awaiting execution in Indonesia on drug trafficking charges.

Julian McMahan, who represents two of the three condemned young men, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “If we do not speak up, our silence will be analysed and will be detrimental to the interests of Australians on death row. We are either opposed to the death penalty and prepared to say so or we risk being criticised for being inconsistent.” In a public statement, McMahan also wrote: “Ritualised killings demean us all... I have stood and read every name at the memorial in Bali. The killing of three more people does nothing worthy of those names. The death penalty brutalises any community which uses or sanctions it.”

The Rudd government has attempted to maintain the pretence that it is opposed to the death penalty; after the three executions on Sunday, foreign minister Stephen Smith declared he would seek an international capital punishment moratorium through the United Nations. This amounts to nothing more than a cover for the government’s consistent complicity.

After attending his regular Sunday church service, Rudd was asked what he thought about the executions in Indonesia carried out just hours earlier. He replied by insisting his thoughts were with the families of those killed in 2002, saying nothing about the work of the firing squad or about capital punishment in general. The prime minister left no doubt that his silence meant consent.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact