

Indonesian bombings portend renewed attacks on democratic rights

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The suicide bombings in Jakarta on July 17, which killed seven people and wounded 50 more, are being exploited to justify inroads into the limited democratic rights gained in Indonesia since the end of the Suharto dictatorship and to step up repressive measures against the mostly impoverished population.

In the immediate wake of the bombings, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono ordered the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) to deploy military personnel throughout the country's rural villages. Army spokesman Brigadier General Christian Zebua said the TNI would assign more than 40,000 soldiers to sub-district level Village Guidance Boards (Babinsa) to monitor activities in the villages.

The mobilisation, coordinated through the military's anti-terror desks at 12 commands across the country, reinstates a pervasive intelligence system that was abandoned in the wake of Suharto's downfall. Plans to re-establish it were first mooted after the 2002 Bali bombings. At the time, human rights groups described the measures as having the potential for extensive human rights abuses by the armed forces.

DNA tests have revealed that the bomber at the JW Marriott Hotel was aged 16 or 17. The youth's DNA was also found in Room 1808 of the Marriott. Police are trying to establish whether the man who checked into the room two days before the blasts was connected with Noordin M Top, the Malaysian-born leader of a splinter group of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), who is believed to have masterminded the attacks.

JI, a fundamentalist organisation that advocates an Islamic state across South East Asia, was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings and other terrorist atrocities in Indonesia. Noordin is one of the most wanted men in the region. The authorities have said that the bomb-making methods used in

the latest attacks strongly indicated that they were his work.

Police have arrested one of his wives, Arina Rahma. Counter-terrorism police in Central Java also arrested one of his alleged followers last week. The man was in possession of a live explosive and, according to police, was planning to carry out a follow-up suicide bombing.

Yudhoyono seized upon the terrorist atrocities to whip up security fears. He claimed that the bombings were intended to destabilise the country following his victory in the July 8 presidential election.

Just hours after the attacks, Yudhoyono delivered a speech in which he implied that they were part of an attempt to prevent him being installed for a second term in office and referred to the possibility of an Iran-style situation developing. He brandished security photos that purportedly showed two masked men shooting at a target that bore his portrait. Critics said the photos were actually old shots dating back to 2004 and had already been presented to the parliament.

Yudhoyono's speech provoked considerable controversy. Spokesmen for his main campaign opponents publicly criticised it. Effendy Ghazali, a University of Indonesia professor, said Yudhoyono had made a "significant mistake" by linking the bombings with the polls. The use of the old photos, he said, showed the president "was in a panic". Yudhoyono, however, stood his ground, and insisted that the pictures were very recent. "What I got was an intelligence report, not rumour, not gossip," he said.

Internationally, the latest bombings have again been used to claim that terrorism in South East Asia justifies the escalating wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the grounds that JI is linked to Al Qaeda.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed on July 23 that the

Indonesian terrorists had “received help from al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan”. A leading Indonesian counter-terrorism official, Ansyad Mbai, told the newspaper that information obtained by police pointed to Al Qaeda’s involvement. “So far the cells which are believed to be [connected with] Al-Qaeda in South-East Asia are the cells in Jemaah Islamiah,” he said.

A former head of the Detachment 88 anti-terrorism squad, Surya Darma, said he was convinced of Al Qaeda’s involvement. “This kind of operation is not a domestic kind of work,” Brigadier-General Darma said. “This is al-Qaeda.”

In fact, most of the key figures accused of organising terrorist attacks in South East Asia trace their roots back to the US-backed Islamic networks that fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. When they returned to the region, they came into conflict with the pro-US Suharto dictatorship and its successors.

Many of JI’s militants were jailed or killed in a state crackdown following the Bali bombings and an ideological and strategic dispute tore apart the unity of the organisation. The *New York Times* noted on July 22 that whereas it was once a network with operations throughout South East Asia, it “now survives mostly in Indonesia in loosely-affiliated small groups”.

While the authorities have severely weakened JI, they have had, according to the *Times*, less success in “uprooting the culture that breeds extremism”.

The continued existence of such organisations testifies to the organic incapacity of the Indonesian ruling elite to offer any solution to the deepening political, social and economic crisis confronting the vast majority of the population.

The Islamists are able to continue to attract followers by appealing to the widespread opposition among Indonesians to the government’s support for the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the popular discontent over the vast chasm between rich and poor, and the corrupt and nepotistic nature of the regime.

The terrorist atrocities committed by the Islamists, however, play directly into the hands of the Indonesian ruling class. The 2002 Bali bombings were used as the pretext for a series of draconian “anti-terror” laws—including the reintroduction of the death penalty—that can be used against any political opposition. The latest attacks are being

used to pressure Yudhoyono to go even further.

According to the *New York Times*, international “terrorism experts” and Indonesian officials are focusing on the alleged “weaknesses in Indonesia’s anti-terrorism campaign”. The *Times* cited commentators demanding harsher measures.

Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group in Jakarta said the authorities had been reluctant to rein in Islamist clerics and schools who sympathised with extremists like Noordin. She alleged that “50 schools” had ties to JI, where “fugitives were sheltered, new recruits were found and money was raised”.

Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, called for greater detention powers to facilitate mass round-ups.

Gunaratna advocated that Indonesia introduce security laws comparable to those in Singapore and Malaysia, which allow suspects to be detained and questioned longer without bringing charges. “That’s the reason there has been no attack inside Singapore or Malaysia,” he claimed. “Since democratisation, some members of the Indonesian elite have the misguided view that these measures are anti-democratic.”

The Indonesian authorities, Gunaratna said, had been “too focused on catching operators when they need to be tougher in actually preventing terrorism. They should take the boxing gloves off”.

Even if Islamist schools and groupings were the initial target of a crackdown, the security laws are intended for wider repression. Under conditions of rising unemployment and poverty due to the global economic turmoil, they will be used to suppress unrest in the working class and rural poor within Indonesia.



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