Ten years since the Bali bombings

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Today marks the tenth anniversary of the October 12, 2002 terrorist suicide bombings on the Indonesian island of Bali, which targeted two popular tourist nightspots. Among the 202 people who lost their lives were 88 Australians, 38 local Indonesians, 26 British and the citizens of 19 other countries in Europe, North America, Asia, South America and Africa.

The Bali bombings are repeatedly described in the establishment media as "Australia's September 11". While it is not the intention of those making the analogy, the description does point to the profound similarities between the ruling elites in the US and Australia in their political exploitation of the two terrorist atrocities.

The September 11, 2001 attacks were seized upon by the American ruling elite to declare that the US was now engaged in an indefinite "war on terror". They were used to justify long-held plans in Washington and the Pentagon to stem the global decline of US imperialism by invading Afghanistan and Iraq and establishing its dominance over the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. Under Bush and Obama, the US has pursued these objectives with blatant criminality for more than a decade, presiding over illegal wars of aggression, assassinations, torture, and intrigues in every corner of the world. Within the US, amid growing social inequality and class tensions, the "war on terror" has been used to strip away fundamental democratic rights and establish the framework for a police state, directed against the working class.

In Australia, the Bali bombings were used to justify the Howard government's unconditional support for the US "war on terror". The quid pro quo was American backing for the assertion of Australian imperialist interests in the South Pacific and South East Asia. Over the past 10 years, the entire political establishment has repeatedly invoked "terrorism" to justify Australian involvement in the Afghan and Iraqi wars, Australian military interventions in the Pacific and an unprecedented assault on democratic rights at home, including the flouting of international covenants and fundamental legal precepts in the treatment of refugees.

Yet, like the myriad unanswered questions raised by the monumental US intelligence failure on September 11, and the fact that not a single official or authority has been held accountable, questions remain over whether the Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah, which carried out the Bali attacks, received assistance from within the Indonesian state apparatus or other sources. The alleged ringleader, Hambali, was seized in Thailand and transferred to the US prison camp in Guántanamo Bay. He has never stood trial and remains in American detention. The other main suspects were either killed by Indonesian police or tried and executed. No public hearing or inquiry, which would have the potential to reveal all the circumstances surrounding the bombings, including the chain of command involved in them, has ever taken place.

To this day, no credible explanation has been provided as to why the Howard government withheld the assessment of foreign and Australian intelligence agencies that tourist facilities in Bali were a likely target of Indonesian-based, Al Qaeda-linked extremists. Months before the bombings, the Australian military, diplomatic staff and the management of Qantas Airways had been specifically advised that a "high" risk existed. The general public, by contrast, for whom Bali has long been a low-cost holiday destination, relied on government travel advisories, which, right up until the eve of the atrocity, reported that the island was "calm" and that tourist services were "operating normally".

What could be characterised as official indifference, at best, towards a possible terrorist attack points to calculations in Australian ruling circles that the death and injury of dozens of Australian tourists in Bali could be politically exploited to advance a reactionary agenda that was already being implemented, but had encountered public opposition.

Just months before the bombings, the Howard government, with bipartisan support from the Labor Party opposition, had pushed through draconian legislation that defined terrorism and treason so broadly it could be interpreted to include forms of political protest and industrial action. It had granted unprecedented powers to the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to detain individuals incommunicado for up to 48 hours, without charge or legal representation. ASIO and other police agencies had dramatically stepped up their surveillance and monitoring of individuals and organisations

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assessed to be opposed to US militarism and Australian backing for it. The new laws had met with considerable opposition, including from civil liberties and human rights organisations.

These measures were enacted amid growing public opposition to the preparations of the Bush administration for the illegal invasion of Iraq. Behind the backs of the population, the Howard government had committed Australia to the US war, with or without the figleaf of UN approval. The global campaign of lies was underway to demonise the Iraqi regime, with false claims that it supported Al Qaeda terrorists and possessed "weapons of mass destruction".

Alongside the preparations for the Iraq war, Canberra was using alleged terrorist threats to legitimise its support for the US imprisonment and torture of Australian citizens in Guántanamo Bay, as well as its so-called "Pacific Solution", under which refugees seeking asylum in Australia were denied their legal rights and detained in prison camps on remote islands.

Under conditions in which China and other countries were striving to develop ties in South Pacific, the threat of terrorism became one of the pretexts for neo-colonial Australian interventions in the region, long regarded by Canberra as vital to its economic and strategic interests. Prior to the Australian military takeover of the Solomon Islands in July 2003, less than a year after the Bali bombings, Howard declared: "The Solomons is our patch…. If the Solomons becomes a failed state, it's a haven potentially for terrorists, drug runners and money launderers … we don't want that on our door step".

At the same time, the Howard government used the Bali bombings to reforge with the Indonesian security forces close military and intelligence cooperation, which had been disrupted after the 1999 Australian-led military intervention into East Timor. The monitoring of purported terrorist threats and refugees arriving by boat has, for the past decade, been the smokescreen behind which Australia, with US support, has built up a significant military presence close to strategic shipping lanes through South East Asia. Under Obama, control of these waterways is a key aspect of US efforts to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia.

Since October 2002, the assault on democratic rights in the name of the "war on terror" has been unrelenting. A total of 54 pieces of legislation has been enacted, establishing the framework for a police-state that will be used against the working class as class tensions sharpen. Secret detention without trial, house arrest through so-called "control orders" and secret warrants sanctioning searches and phone tapping were among the fundamental attacks on civil liberties in the Howard government's 2005 "Anti-Terrorism Bill", which was justified with references to Bali.

When the Labor Party won office in 2007, it seamlessly continued where the Howard government had left off. The Rudd/Gillard governments kept all Howard's legislation on the books and deepened the assault on democratic rights. This year, the Labor government passed laws that allow a citizen to be extradited if they are charged with "political offenses" by another country. The legislation was specifically aimed at ensuring that WikiLeaks' editor Julian Assange, whose sole "crime" is the exposure of American atrocities, crimes and intrigues, can be hauled off to face a show-trial in the US.

The participation of Howard, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott in commemorations in Bali today is the height of cynicism. They, along with the entire Australian political establishment, have exploited the deaths, and the grief of the victims' friends and families, for the most reactionary ends. On Thursday, Gillard once again shamelessly used Bali to legitimise Australia's decade-long participation in the brutal US occupation of Afghanistan, declaring "we are still there making sure Afghanistan doesn't become a safe haven again for the training of terrorists who take Australian lives." She failed to mention that Hambali and other JI members were part of the US-sponsored jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, or that the US and its allies are supporting Al Qaeda-linked insurgents as part of their current regime-change operation in Syria.

After a decade of whipping up hysteria about terrorism to justify their crimes internationally and the destruction of democratic rights domestically, the lies of the ruling elite have begun to wear thin among workers and youth in Australia and around the world. The critical issue is the development of such opposition into a politically conscious, international movement of the working class against the capitalist profit system itself, the source of imperialist militarism and repression.

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