

Islamist Violence in Indonesia: Bringing the State Back In.

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The current state of Islamist militancy in Indonesia has yielded a somewhat conflicting set of outcomes, both in relation to the future of Jihadist activism and how best to respond to it. On the one hand Southeast East (sic Indo) has not emerged as the "next front" of the global war on terror as Gersham (2002) predicted. And in fact we are not seeing the manifestation of the much feared slippery slope phenomenon where exposure to radical Islam will lead to increasingly large numbers of people taking up the idiom of violent extremism. And more interestingly we are not seeing militancy establish itself as the moral vanguard of a creeping cultural Islamisation of the state - i.e. the Pakistan phenomena. At the same time however the problem of acts of violence justified by and in defense of various strands of Islamist ideology has not abated. Alas, it seems then that Indonesia like a variety of other nation-states are confronted with an ongoing problem of a particular type of relapsing and remitting religiously justified "light insurgency" enacted against both apparatuses of the state and the perceived symbols of western modernity.

To elucidate this discussion I will engage several areas of analysis including: a brief historical analysis addressing the actors and ideologies at work in the trajectory of modern Islamism in Indonesia, an exposition on the efficacy of the response to the problem of violent militancy and finally an analysis detailing the vexed role of the state in being both an object of violence and an agent of radicalization. By highlighting these themes this paper will advance the position that the persistence of structural violence employed by the Indonesian state at various levels directly and indirectly creates conditions that increase the attractiveness of the groups that justify a violent agenda on Islamist precepts. Thus while the Indonesian state has taken an increasingly vigilant stand against activities of JI and the splinter cells it has inspired, it has been much slower in responding to other trends, in particular the Islamisation of street violence.

Islamism in Indonesia: Actors and Ideologies

The trajectory of Islam itself presents a particular problem if one wants to explain the persistence of violent religiosity in post-New Order Indonesia as a function of

ideology. While we cannot discount the role that ideology plays in informing the world view of those who commit to a program of Islamist militancy, assessing the relationship between typologies of piety and the connection between certain types of groups and acts of violence requires a nuanced perspective. For the purposes of this work the delineations around the practice of Sunni Islam in Indonesia can be most accurately understood by assessing piety in terms of adherence to either Modernist or Traditionalists frameworks. Traditionalists adhere to a syncretised version of Islam that incorporates local (non-Muslim) customs into ecclesiastic rites, such as ancestor veneration and saint worship. Conversely, Modernists subscribe to versions of revivalist ideology that seek to strip the practice of Islam from the various manifestations of “cultural innovation” that occurred as it was transmitted into the Malay world (Hooker 2003). It is important to note however that the modernist tent is a big a one and includes ideological frameworks ranging from versions of culturally austere Salafism (that reject politics and calls for a retreat into prayer) to the neo-modernist ideology of Muslim Brotherhood that espouse a distinctly political program to Islamize the state. When it comes to political activism, the Traditionalist tent is similarly broad, and over the past half century has included groups that range from benevolent Nahdatul Ulama to the violent activism of Dural Islam.

While the Traditionalist-Modernist divide is an important metric in understanding the broad delineations within the rubric Indonesian Islam, when it comes to assessing the trajectory of violent activism it presents some limitations. This is particularly true when the Traditionalist-Modernist delineation is used to predict the future unfolding of violent activism. Since the attacks in Bali, the desire on the part of terror analysts to categorise and effectively “order” degrees of religiosity to fit the metrics of threat analyses not only miss the mark in terms of understanding the dynamics of Islam in Southeast Asia but more broadly miss the mark as a predictive indicator of how and when violent attacks will occur. In this regard there has been a fixation in the recent analysis offered by Chalk & Rabassa (2009) and Ramakrishna (2007) with the “Arabisation” of Indonesian Islam. This view places a particular emphasis on the security problems associated the import of Modernist ideology and cultural practices associated the Persian Gulf and in particular maintains that the propagation of Salafi ideology acts not only as a *agent provocateur* of radicalized sentiment (and stokes the latent fires of intolerance) but as a more general threat to Indonesian secularism

(Eliraz 2004). However, even if we can construct a “good Muslim – bad Muslim” calculus whereby adherence to a menu of theological moderation as defined by Javanized Islam is good, and adherence to variants Arabised influenced modernism is bad, the cleavages within Indonesian Islam are varied and complex enough that securitising Middle Eastern influences represents a vast over-simplification of facts.

Yet if we are looking to assess the degree to which Modernist movements (Salafism among them) have been engaged in contestations for political power through both violent and non-violent activism it is difficult to maintain (taking a long view) that either modernism or traditionalism have been more or less prone to inspire strains of militancy. In fact, many have argued, including Bertrand (2004) and Emmerson (2006) that secular politics has done as much to radicalize Indonesian Islam as specific modes of theological interpretation. Frequently cited examples of this include: the Japanese mobilization of the Islamist Masyumi organization as a force of anti-colonialism in the later half of the second world war, the Suharto regime’s use of Islamist gangs to put down elements unfriendly to its agenda and more recent use of Islamist militias to aid the military in its struggle against Christian separatists in Ambon (Hefner 2000). In addition to this the most violent and well-organized Islamist movement in the history of the region, Dural Islam (the forbearer of both the Majelis Mujahideen Indonesia and Jemmah Islamiyyah), was a Traditionalist in its ideological foundation, using Javanese mysticism to justify its claims to legitimacy (Hefner 2000).

Responding to Islamist Violence

It cannot be denied that the Indonesian state has taken a vigilant posture against acts of a certain type of Islamist violence. Over the past decade the Indonesian security services have not only disrupted major attacks but have also put down major JI cells including, most recently, the one led by Noordin Mohammed Top. But in assessing the totality of the response of the Indonesian state to the problem of Islamist violence it is necessary to look beyond JI and the manifestations of Islamist terror directed at western targets. At this juncture it is important to unpack in some detail the distinct manifestations of violence associated with the Islamist agenda that has over the past century manifested. Here activism can be placed into several distinct categories:

- (1) Activism that has sought to Islamise the state through bringing non-Muslims into line – more specifically enforced piety, as well as vice and intimidation campaigns,
- (2) Activism that employs Islamist precepts (and violence) to sew inter-communal discord among and between the various religious groups in Indonesia.
- (3) Activism that has sought to violently Islamise the state and forcefully undo the secular character of post Independence Indonesia
- (4) Activism that embraces elements of aforementioned but draws on a globalised rhetoric to punish foreign interests within the state.

The response of the Indonesian state to these four typologies of activism has not been uniform and has been framed both by Indonesia's complex transition out of authoritarianism but also by the utility and convenience of these groups serve as a servant to elite interests. In this regard the fourth manifestation has gotten the most attention and has had most negative impact on the prestige of the Indonesian state overseas. Not only has Indonesian state been proactive in an ongoing violent struggle against the various cells nominally aligned to JI but it has also cooperated with the international community (against popular domestic sentiment) in turning over high value detainees such as Hanbali. Assessing the response to the first two manifestations is more complex. Groups that stir inter-religious discord and maintain an agenda to Islamise the state (at various levels) are a strategic problem for the Indonesian state and how best to respond to this problem is tied to a series of issues related to Indonesia's brand of federalism and role of Islam within the evolving contours of Indonesia's political spectrum. Here, the fluctuating line between freedom of expression and intimidation is one that is frequently played out in the media, as are various regional demands for religious autonomy. And in many cases the state has been unable or unwilling to spend precious political capital to push back against manifestations of Islamist activism that seek to enforce piety – usually among the economically and politically disenfranchised. The third manifestation of activism represents yet another problem. Certainly JI challenges the state but in an indirect way, it primarily seeks to embarrass the state by highlighting its inability to protect foreign interests – 5 star hotels, Embassies and places frequented by tourists. What remains interesting is that despite the fact JI emerged from the DI tradition there is no group that has continued on with DI's agenda to violently challenge the state in an effort to bring about its collapse. There are probably several reasons for this. First, it is quite likely that no one wants an enemy in the Indonesian security apparatus. Challenging the state directly and violently as opposed to attacking foreign interests

would be a huge escalation and would no doubt yield diminishing returns. Despite the fact that there was a transition out of authoritarian politics many institutions are still run by people that discharged security during the New Order regime. Thus, it is quite likely that direct and violent challenge to state (individuals, institutions and apparatuses) by Islamist elements would be dealt with by using equally aggressive and non-traditional tactics. Secondly, by all accounts extreme Islamist politics do not have a popular constituency in Indonesia. This can be evidenced by looking not only at the public response of the to the tactics used by JI but also by looking at the general performance of Muslim political parties in the electoral process.

Recalibrating the antecedents of Jihad: Bringing the state back in

The response of the state to the problem of Islamist violence seems to be moving in contradictory directions. As I touched upon in the previous section the response of the state to the idiom of Islamist violence as it has been embodied by JI and splinter cells has been swift, on the other hand the response on the part of the state to manifestations of Islamist violence involving expressions of the Islamist agenda that extend or promote codes of structural violence within Indonesian society represents has been severely lacking. In many cases the lack of response highlights the extent to which the state is not only indifferent to the problem but in many cases uses the Islamist voice for its own institutional ends. This trend is most clearly evidenced in the relationship between Islamist gangs and state actors in Indonesia's informal security sector.

Of these gangs, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is the best known and the most successful. [The group was formed in the late 1990s by the Saudi educated petty criminal Habib Rizieq and maintains a rhetorically Salafi-Jihadist agenda which selectively enforces its hard line world view across the archipelago via "street justice" on people and groups that do not conform to its agenda – mainly prostitutes and bar owners.] While FPI has not been implicated in any attacks on western targets directly it frequently sells its "security monitoring services" to the highest bidder. The main question surrounding FPI on the subject of radicalization involves the complex question of ideological transition (Wilson 2006). Thus, are FPI members more likely than others to cross the rubicon from street level vigilantism to more lethal attacks? As it stands most FPI members are purely profit driven but there in concern some corners (especially given that FPI is employed by criminal syndicates associated with

various state apparatuses) that if emboldened over time without consequence their members base could migrate from ‘Jihad for hire’ to ‘ideological Jihad.’ Moreover, if we advance the idea that criminality is a key driver in processes of violent transformation – that people who are violent to begin with will be more likely to commit an act of mass violence in the name of Islam, then perhaps the potential for ideological migration among FPI member is particularly troublesome. In the case of the FPI not only has the state been selective in prosecuting it for intimidation campaigns (it finally jailed Risiq for incitement) but the connection between security consulting services connected to the state and the FPI network presents a troubling dynamic. There have many examples where FPI has been retained at the behest of security interests aligned to state interest (Wilson 2006). This reality presents a worrying trend that brings into question the state’s commitment to tackling the problem of Islamist violence. As I stated earlier, Indonesia’s transition out of the authoritarianism has been a successful yet incomplete endeavor and there are still old political dynamics working themselves out. The use of Islamist gang like the FPI to keep other groups’ in-check not only perpetuates old politics, it perpetuates the acceptability of Islamist and is deleterious to the nation-states unfolding democratization process.

Conclusion:

This paper has been a modest attempt to recalibrate to the analytic frame-work around how we view the connection between the state and the ongoing problem of Islamist violence in world’s most populous Muslim nation-state. My analysis in this paper has tried to demonstrate that by de-emphasising the role of the specific typologies of Islamist thought and re-centring analysis around the role of the state we can gain a much clearer and nuanced picture on why Islamist violence has been despite it’s lack of popularity as a means of been persistent. I have also tried to demonstrate that because the threat has itself not been properly understood the means by which the radicalization process been understood has been similarly flawed. This is particularly true in the policy prescriptions given by Indonesia’s allies, notable the USA and Australia, in regards to counter-radicalization strategies. Certainly gains have been made is closing down certain Pesentren (religious schools) that preach hate. Similarly, as a result of western pressure Indonesia’s security services are now more vigilant in

their surveillance of certain groups. At the same time however many of the demands made at the request of western intelligence agencies are short-sighted and only reflect the immediate security interests of specific actors outside Southeast Asia. For example, demands that the Indonesian government takes a more activist position in the policing of religious schools and more generally “moderate” the practice of Islam is a particularly ineffectual way of combating radicalism. Secularism has been of the hallmarks of the Indonesian state and many analysts worry that moves to empower the doctrinally conservative MUI (Majelis Ulemma Indonesia) – the National Ulemma Council – to more actively police religious practice will lead to deterioration in religious freedom. In particular, moderate and non-violent groups like the Sufis and the Shaii Ahmadiyah sect worry that if MUI is empowered by the state to enforce doctrinal norms they will inevitably face more persecution than they already do. Similarly, secular civil society groups worry that if the MUI is empowered by the state they will face the growing tide of state sanctioned religiosity, albeit under the guise of combating radicalism.

On the complex subject of radicalization the current state of affairs yields an interesting and contradictory set of dynamics. I would conclude by saying only that we are continuing to see spasms of violence not because JI has large constituency or because Indonesia has ethno-religious issues that make religiously based violence more or less likely or because Indonesia is a highly radicalized society, rather this phenomenon is the bi-product of unresolved secular political dynamics associated with its clunky transition out of authoritarian politics.

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