

Double threat to democracy

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On October 12, 2002, a group of jihadi terrorists sent their explosives-laden van out into the Bali night and killed 202 people. Condemnation within Indonesia was swift. Politicians, religious figures and others lined up to denounce the bombings, the worst terror attack in Indonesia's history.

Despite swift condemnation of the act itself, it soon became apparent that many Indonesians did not believe there was an Islamic terrorist network operating within their borders. The ranks of sceptics famously included then vice-president Hamzah Haz and prominent figures in Indonesia's two largest Islamic socio-religious organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.

Even the bombers themselves seemed torn between claiming credit for the Bali attacks and alleging the hidden hand of American and Israeli intelligence agents. Amrozi, the man dubbed the smiling assassin by the Australian press, speculated at his 2003 trial that the massive size of the explosion may have resulted from a conspiracy. He suggested foreigners could have intercepted the bomb he and his accomplices prepared and replaced it with a much more powerful micro-nuclear device. The courts of the time were to have none of this though, sentencing Amrozi to death along with his two co-accused, Imam Samudra and Mukhlas. All three men were executed in 2008. The courts meted out life sentences to two of the other convicted perpetrators, although lawyers for each man are seeking a sentence cut to a shorter fixed prison term.

For years these circumstances gave rise to the strange spectacle of stern law enforcement against jihadi terrorists co-existing with scepticism that terrorist networks were authentic. But the mounting number of trials as Indonesian police rounded up the perpetrators of further bombing attacks chipped away at the public's doubts, in addition to greatly weakening the networks responsible for the bombings.

Overall, police have now apprehended more than 600 terror suspects. A Jakarta court also pronounced Jemaah Islamiyah to be a forbidden organisation at prosecutors' behest in 2008, a move the government had resisted for years. Since 2005 there has been only a single large-scale bombing in Indonesia, although smaller attacks have continued.

The liberal Islamic scholar Ulil Abshar Abdalla, himself twice the target of jihadi assassination plots, cites then vice-president Jusuf Kalla's decision in 2005 to summon Muslim leaders to watch the final video messages recorded by the suicide bombers before the second Bali attacks as a key turning point in the battle for public opinion. The video messages, along with a monologue by a masked orator believed to be now deceased terrorist Noordin M Top, were recovered in a police raid about a month after the bombings. Ironically, in the days after the attack, Kalla himself responded to Australian pressure to ban Jemaah Islamiyah by claiming that the organisation had never existed.

The contrast between the current Nahdlatul Ulama chairman, Said Aqil Siradj, and his predecessor at the time of the Bali bombings, Hasyim Muzadi, underlines the change in attitudes. Where Hasyim strongly and publicly questioned JI's existence, Said has been outspoken against radicalism and its role in generating terrorism. Press reports detail him last year calling for the government to block radical websites and not just online pornography, and advising the closure of a specific Islamic boarding school if it turned out to be a centre of terrorism and radicalism.

In another sign of progress, when one of the bomb makers from the 2002 Bali attacks finally faced Indonesian courts this year after his arrest in 2011 in Pakistan, no serious public figure contested the validity of his conviction. Indeed the bomb maker himself, Umar Patek, readily confessed he had played a role in the attack and apologised to victims, even if he also denied he had ever been a JI member.

Many Australians do not recognise the successes Indonesia has had against terrorism. The 2011 Lowy Institute poll found Australians were as convinced as they were in 2006 that Indonesia is a dangerous source of Islamic terrorism. In this year's poll, 22 per cent of Australians thought that the Bali bombers had still not been brought to justice at all, despite the fact that only one key perpetrator remains at large. The others have faced Indonesian courts or have been killed in anti-terror raids, or in the case of key plotter Hambali, have been in US custody without charge since 2003.

That is not to say that successes against jihadi terrorism have been conclusive, or that Indonesia's counterterrorism effort has been free of missteps and oversights. In particular, Indonesia has not worked out how to constrain the dissemination of radical ideology, even in cases where it has radical ideologues behind bars.

New jihadis continue to emerge, even if they are much less capable than their forebears. A small but significant minority of released terrorist prisoners – 23 out of roughly 300, according to figures cited by a senior police officer – are known to have reoffended, despite police and non-government efforts to turn them away from violent extremism.

The high number of suspects killed in anti-terror raids is also coming under increasing scrutiny.

The overall picture is one of a reduced risk of large-scale bombing, but continued and even increased efforts at smaller scale attacks.

"It doesn't seem like there's the organisational capacity or the technical capacity to pull off something on the scale of the Bali bombs," says the International Crisis Group's Sidney Jones, who has observed terrorism in Indonesia for more than a decade. "But I think it's sobering to think how many more attempts we're seeing at terrorism in the last two to three years than what we did around 2000-2001, when everything was aimed at one major attack per year."

Terrorism is not the only manifestation of extremism in Indonesia. The larger and perhaps more worrying oversight has been the Indonesian government's failure to tackle violent religious intolerance. Islamic paramilitaries have used threats and violence to attack minorities, enforce their moral standards and press for changes to government policy.

Comprehensive data on this phenomenon is hard to come by. The Jakarta-based Setara Institute recorded 244 violations of freedom of religion/belief in 2011, and 129 violations in the six months to June this year. These figures include both state and non-state actors. Nor do all the violations involve physical violence, a key difference between terrorism and violent intolerance. Where terrorism typically aims to be fatal, only the worst instances of violent intolerance cause loss of life. Often, to be effective, violent intolerant groups need only administer beatings, engage in shows of force, or make implicit or explicit threats of violence.

Violent intolerance drew widespread international attention earlier this year, when paramilitaries forced the cancellation of a Lady Gaga concert in Jakarta, which had already sold out. Gaga's opponents protested that the concert would violate religious norms and local culture, and one group claimed to have secured 150 tickets so that if need be they could forcefully bring the performance to a halt.

Shiite and Ahmadi Muslims have been another target, both of which are minority groups within Indonesian Islam. Paramilitaries have also disrupted cultural events and discussions when they have objected to the speakers or the topics of discussion, as well as preventing worship at certain churches. Paramilitaries have also used violence to pressure courts and reinforce rulings in religious cases.

In one instance, hardliners rioted in a central Javanese town even after prosecutors sought the maximum penalty under law in the trial of a Protestant man accused of blasphemy.

The stern action police have taken against terrorism stands in stark contrast to the authorities' permissiveness of violent intolerance. Police have on occasion stood by and let attacks happen. In

addition, when suspects have been brought before the courts, perpetrators have at best received a slap on the wrist. In one infamous instance, those responsible for an attack in 2011 on an Ahmadiyya congregation in Banten that left three congregation members dead, were sentenced to three to six months in prison. A member of the same Ahmadiyya congregation subsequently received a six-month sentence, heavier than some of the attackers. The man had disobeyed police orders for the congregation to leave its compound before the attack and struck a crowd member who tried to enter. In a more recent case in August this year, national police chief General Timur Pradopo told parliament that the easiest solution to an attack on a small Shiite Muslim community in East Java that left two dead would be to relocate the Shiites to a different site. His comments drew criticism for their lack of commitment to protecting the Shiite.

What accounts for this difference? One clear factor is the difference in community attitudes to the two forms of violence.

“Terrorism is easier to condemn, the community can easily not accept terrorism,” says Ulil. “But attacking Ahmadiyya, attacking Shiites or closing churches, perhaps they [the community] do not accept the action, but they can accept that there are people who want to attack or limit the freedom of Ahmadis, because they have the same views as violent perpetrators that Ahmadis or Shiites are not Muslims.”

Two polls of Indonesian public opinion fielded just months apart neatly illustrate this point. In the multi-province Lowy Institute Indonesia poll, 61 per cent of respondents disagreed that it was OK for groups to intimidate Ahmadiyya. On the other hand, 61.1 per cent of respondents to a poll fielded by Jakarta think tank the Centre for Strategic and International Studies agreed that Ahmadiyya should be disbanded because it was deviant. Just 1.3 per cent said Ahmadis should be afforded freedom; 27.1 per cent said they did not know.

The government’s consistent failure to act has led some to question whether Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono himself shares the paramilitaries’ view of minorities.

Ulil, since 2010 a board member of the president’s Demokrat Party, disagrees. “With the possible exception of the Minister for Religion, I don’t think the government, meaning the president and his cabinet, sympathise with groups like FPI [the Islamic Defenders Front, a paramilitary group]. The most you could say is that they are afraid to take firm action, and that is political fear, because if they take firm action against FPI and its ilk, they will be considered to be confronting the Islamic community.”

If political calculations do account for inaction, then the prospects for firm steps to counter violent intolerance seem bleak. Indonesia holds its five-yearly legislative and presidential elections in 2014. With Yudhoyono now into his second and final term, many eyes have already turned to these polls.

That is not to say that the electoral case is clear-cut. The scholars Andrée Feillard and Rémy Madinier observe in a recent study that Indonesian Muslims express conservative views about Islam in polls, but then do not vote for radicals who enter politics. Indeed, Islamic parties have not profited at the ballot box in Indonesia by pushing an Islamist agenda. Nor have violent intolerant groups been free of public criticism. The Lady Gaga concert became a national controversy, and FPI and similar groups have themselves been subject to counter protests.

Whatever the electoral impact, to fail to act against violent religious intolerance carries its own high cost. Indonesia’s decision to face down terrorism after Bali and gradually bring sceptics in the Islamic community on board has been an important part of its current success as a stable democracy and its emergence as a regional power. To allow violent religious intolerance to flourish unimpeded undermines the quality of that democracy and with it the fabric of Indonesian society. In particular circumstances, it can also feed back into terrorism as a source of new jihadi recruits.

“Rising intolerance can also aid the spread of Salafi jihadi ideology,” says Solahudin, a leading expert on Indonesian jihadism who has written a book on the networks and ideology behind the Bali bombings.* “Because basically Salafi jihadism is just an extreme form of intolerance.”

Solahudin has researched the backgrounds of hundreds of convicted terrorists and come to the conclusion that on average they were activists in intolerant Islamic groups before turning to terror.

Indonesia has expended great effort to rein in terrorism over the past decade, and significantly reduced the threat as a result. The time is overdue to bring this second form of violent extremism under control.

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**I am translating this book, to be published by UNSW Press and the Lowy Institute next year.*