

An Edifice of Denial: Australia's Indonesian Delusions

Conférence prononcée par le Pr. David Martin-Jones de l'Université de Tasmanie (Australie) aux "Mardis du MCC (27 novembre 2002).

Speaking in the aftermath of the Bali explosion on 12 October 2002, ex-Australian foreign minister, Gareth Evans, argued that Australia should prosecute the war against terrorism intelligently, by being 'sensitive' to Indonesian concerns.¹ This raises the paradox, though, that for twenty years Australian tertiary and bureaucratic institutions had nurtured a generation of Indonesia watchers who indeed often exhibited profound sensitivity to Indonesian interests. Yet, despite this sensitivity, they failed to perceive the evolving threat developing on Australia's doorstep. As one prominent defence analyst based at the Australian National University (ANU) declared: 'There is no doubt that we all underestimated the extent to which militant organisations cooperate in Southeast Asia.'²

Why was this the case? The question is even more curious because it has always been relatively straightforward for western analysts in general and Australian policy makers in particular to gain an appreciation of the world view that is capturing hearts and minds amongst young, educated and increasingly militant Indonesian males. In any downtown Jakarta bookstore it is possible to pick up for approximately \$3 a slim volume entitled *Saya Teroris? Sebuah Pleidoi* by Fauzan al-Anshari which gives an account of the life, times and beliefs of self-styled sheikh Abu Bakar Ba'asyir.

Ba'asyir has been identified as the spiritual guru of the *Jemaah Islamayah* network alleged to be behind the bombing of the Kuta Beach resort. From Ba'asyir's somewhat paranoid perspective the United States and Zionism have been plotting for decades to destroy Islam in order to secure global domination. To this end, Ba'asyir maintains, US agencies engineered the World Trade Center attacks in order to justify a global assault on its enemies, notably the Palestinians and the Taliban. More recently, the sheikh has argued that 'infidels' perpetrated the outrage at Kuta Beach for the analogous purpose of discrediting the variety of purified Islam that he and his ilk purvey.

The sheikh is, of course, a conspiracy theorist. Accordingly, the world is engaged in a war between the forces serving the will of Allah and the 'spider's house' of the US Great Satan and its allies like Australia. As Allah's will engendered the fall of Suharto and facilitated the revival of pure Islam on Indonesian soil it must, like Afghanistan, now be the target of the great global Satan.

On his return to his Pondok Ngruki school in Solo, Central Java in 1999 from his regional *hejira*, spent congenially in Malaysia, where he established both religious schools and the lineaments of the *Jemaah Islamayah* network, Ba'asyir immediately invited his fellow Muslim clerics to prepare 'for jihad against America'. To this end he constituted the *Majlis Mujahideen Indonesia* to coordinate those Indonesians committed to the purified creed that has gained increasing popularity amongst young Muslim males globally.

This doctrine, initially articulated in the 1950s Middle East by those radically opposed to post-colonial secular nationalist regimes, holds that only a pure Islam could address

the 'hideous schizophrenia' of the modern condition. Thus, the Egyptian Muslim Brother Sayyid Qutb maintained that this 'ideological ideal' system alone could 'rescue humanity' from 'the barbarism of technocratic culture', along with the vice of an authoritarian nationalism imposed by a Nasser or a Suharto as well as 'from the stifling trap of communism'.³

This Islamist ideocracy has proved both remarkably resilient and extended its global appeal over the last two decades. Paradoxically, as the sociologist Ernest Gellner observed, the Islamist ideal of faith and virtue founded on a pre-industrial scripturalism has actually benefited from the technological revolution and the transformation of communications. In the post-modern, post-colonial world, identification with this scripturalist high culture becomes the hallmark of Islamic urban sophistication. In Southeast Asia, as in the Middle East and Pakistan, it is urban male graduates who find in the formalism of austere salafist teaching the simplicity and certitude that serves as a fitting accompaniment to their education in science and technology. Therefore, jihadist groups, like those in Indonesia, have their own websites and are comfortable with mobile phones provided they don't emit degenerate musical dialling tones.

This increasingly seductive Islamism imported into Indonesia since the late 1980s, then, promotes a traditionalist and illiberal arrangement in which society is governed by networks, quasi-tribes, alliances forged on the basis of kin and services rendered, rather than on formal relations in a defined bureaucratic manner. Mafia activities and terror franchises sustain this developing arrangement. This is how *al-Qaeda* currently operates, be it in Kuala Lumpur, Bali, New York or London.

It is in this context that, since the fall of Suharto in 1998, a bewildering array of groups in Indonesia have sprung up sharing the commitment to building an Islamic realm. This globalising Islamist radical chic finds expression in groups like *Laskar Jihad*, which aim to uphold the integrity of Indonesia and establish sharia discipline across the archipelago armed with a Koran in one hand and a Kalshnikov in the other.

In Jakarta, *Front Pembela Islamaya* makes a habit of regularly trashing tourist areas frequented by decadent westerners. Meanwhile, *Hizb-ut Tahrir*, a movement begun in Jordan in 1953 but proscribed across the Middle East, seeks to unite the Muslim world as a superpower or *Daulah Khalifah* governed according to the Koran and recreating the Caliphate of the early days of Islam. Consequently, when Colin Powell visited Indonesia in August in an evidently failed attempt to strengthen the government's anti-terrorist resolve, one of its leading lights, Rahmat Hassan, pronounced that 'America is the biggest terrorist in the world, they have stomped on Muslims too many times'.

Clearly, an Islamist internationale has now permeated Southeast Asia. It has been establishing pan-regional networks since at least the late 1980s and uses the devices of modernity for its own anti-secularisation purposes. Further, it has been apparent from early 1990s that Islamic opinion across the region has become increasingly radicalised. After the 1991 Gulf War, increasing numbers of younger Muslim students went on extended sabbaticals in Afghani or Pakistani training camps to learn the art of the mujahideen, bringing back its training in faith, community service and bomb

making to the Javanese heartland often with the tacit approval of disaffected elements in parliament and in the military.

Nor is this increasing radicalism a minority vocation. In December 2001 a poll conducted by a sociologist at the moderate State University of Islamic Studies (IAIN) and published in *Tempo* (December 2001) found that 61.4% of the population supported the implementation of sharia law in Indonesia.

More recently, during the August 2002 meeting of the National Assembly (the *Majlis Perpetuan Rakyat* – MPR), Islamists sought to reinstate a clause, omitted from the original Indonesian constitution of August 1945, that made carrying out the sharia obligatory for ‘all followers of Islam’. Although rejected by the MPR, the amendment received support in the assembly from both Vice President Hamzah Haz, the speaker of the assembly, Amien Rais, and on the streets from increasingly vocal Islamist groups.

In other words, it has been evident since 1998 that Indonesia has been transforming itself into Pakistan on Australia’s doorstep. What is surprising is that the official scholar-bureaucratic orthodoxy in both Australia and Southeast Asia studiously maintained that this was not, in fact, happening. Instead, official orthodoxy held that, unlike its Middle Eastern equivalent, Indonesian ‘civil’ Islam is of a distinctly more tolerant hue, both capital friendly and democratic. In Australian academe and the media more generally any attempt to contest this Panglossian understanding was to commit the sin of ‘constructing’ Indonesia as an alien enemy to the north and thus add fuel to Australia’s unwarranted and deep seated dread of the ‘other’.

How did this edifice of denial come about? It can be traced to the attempts of successive governments from the 1980s, and particularly during the premiership of Paul Keating (1993-96), to redefine the country as an Australasian nation. To convince a sceptical public this required the academic and media ‘construction’ of Indonesia as a benign, cooperative neighbour within a stable and prosperous Southeast Asian region. Having established this construct, it evidently constituted Australia’s logical and inevitable destiny to enmesh itself in a web of relationships with the attractively diverse and economically booming region to the North.

The problem was that maintaining this construct politicised both Australian academe and the federal bureaucracy especially senior advisers working in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade or in the Office of National Assessments. The government endowed Asia-Pacific research schools and generously disbursed grants intended not for objective analysis of regional issues, but to lend academic credibility to a debatable political agenda. This evolving bureaucratic-intellectual complex became increasingly convinced of the validity of its strategy of engagement. Moreover, as this edifice mistook ideological preferences for sceptical and empirical analysis, it lost all ability to reflect upon or test its ruling assumptions. Dissenting viewpoints were either marginalized or ignored.

As a result, scholarship, especially of the ANU Pacific Asia Research school variety, assumed a batik clad political correctness that bore little connection to regional realities. This is revealed most obviously in a dazzling record of analytical failure that consistently misread regional prospects stretching from the disastrous Asian economic

crisis of 1997, through the Balkanisation of the Indonesian archipelago to the bombing at Kuta. In this self-induced deception Australian observers mirrored the wider officially sponsored delusion promoted by the scholar-bureaucracy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its western adherents who during the 1990s argued that the region was one of 'increased domestic tranquillity and regional order'.⁴

Unfortunately, by the first years of the new century this flawed thinking pervaded elements of the Australian national bureaucracy, particularly the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which along with its media fellow travellers became firm supporters of the Jakarta orthodoxy and who today still insist that Australia must at all costs seek to join in the vapid colloquies of 'ASEAN Plus 3'. Just as disturbingly, the intelligence analysis arm of the Australian government, the Office of National Assessments, was also not immune from the baleful effects of politicisation and was overcome by an ASEAN induced miasma when it peered north of the Timor gap.

Yet, it has been evident to anyone with a semblance of scepticism that ASEAN, perhaps more appropriately known as the arrangement of Authoritarian States Encouraging and Abetting Nihilism, has been in complete meltdown together with the regional economy since the mid-1990s. As analysts were extolling the much vaunted, but extremely short, 'Pacific Century', *Jemmah Islamaya* and its regional affiliates like *Abu Sayyaf*, *Hizb-ut Tahrir* and the *Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia* were busily establishing networks and linkages. ASEAN, meanwhile, was blithely maintaining its doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and advertising the utility of shared Asian values.

In other words, analytical opinion towards Southeast Asia was highly 'sensitive' to Indonesian concerns generally and to official sensibilities which had an interest in minimising awareness of internal instability in particular. Thus, Australian thinking gave ready credence to commentators in government sponsored institutes of regional affairs like the elusive Jusuf Wanandi of the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta who maintained that: 'Attention to such groups as the Laskar Jihad has been overblown. They are rather noisy groups, but small and marginal.'⁵ Unsurprisingly, such views found their obedient echo in western comment on Indonesia, with the likes of Alan Dupont pronouncing only a few weeks before the Bali bombing that 'the tendency is still to overplay the [terror] threat'.⁶

Such deference to official regional opinion is all the more worrying in the case of the CSIS, long suspected by human rights groups as a front for Indonesian army intelligence. The CSIS was behind the creation of the protean fundamentalist grouping *Komando Jihad* in 1977 in which sheikh Ba'asyir originally rose to prominence. Allegedly dreamt up by the then head of the CSIS, General Ali Moertopo, *Komando Jihad* was a covertly sponsored proxy group set up to wage a violent campaign in favour of an Islamic state in order to discredit the moderate Muslim *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, which posed a growing electoral threat to President Suharto's ruling *Golkar* party.⁷

It is perhaps ironic that Australian commentary should take at face value the opinions emanating from official think-tanks extolling regional harmony and stability when they helped inspire those very forces of extremism currently afflicting the region in

the first place. Even in the aftermath of the Bali bombing, the Jakarta orthodoxy in Australia continued to maintain a state of denial, initially questioning whether there was any evidence of *al-Qaeda* involvement in the explosion. At the same time, the received wisdom incoherently accuses the Canberra government of not passing on CIA intelligence that apparently named Bali as a possible target of Islamist terrorists whilst simultaneously implying that the bombing itself was the result of Australia being too close to the American led war on terrorism – views not far removed from those of the sheikh himself.

What Australia needs, then, is not increased ‘sensitivity’ but more accurate threat perception. This requires a reassessment of the increasingly vacuous idea of Asian engagement and the forging of stronger bilateral ties with non-Muslim states in Southeast Asia such as Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines that feel equally threatened by the spread of Islamic extremism. Unfortunately, such a re-evaluation cannot be accommodated in a contemporary climate of academic orthodoxy that treats with Olympian disdain the idea that Indonesia might constitute a security problem. The prevailing ‘you can’t say that’ mentality combined with a self-serving web of academic micro-celebrity that enables international relations analysts to pontificate on events after Bali while remaining unaccountable for their predictive errors the day before does not augur well for any balanced reassessment to take place.

¹ BBC *Newsnight*, 16 October 2002.

² Alan Dupont quoted in ‘Bali bomb blasts may reveal al Qaeda fingerprints,’ Reuters Report (Singapore), 13 October 2002.

³ Sayyid Qutb *The Religion of the Future* (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations: 1971), p.121

⁴ Amitav Acharya, ‘The periphery as core: the third world and security Studies’, in Keith Krause and Michael Williams, eds., *Critical Security Studies* (London: UCL Press, 1997), p.310.

⁵ Jusuf Wanandi, ‘Indonesia: a failed state?’ *Washington Quarterly*, 25: 3 (Summer 2002), p.142.

⁶ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 October 2002, p.20

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights in Indonesia and East Timor* (New York: Asia Watch, 1989), pp.76-85.