

WebMemo



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Stand by Indonesia in Its Struggle for a Just and Civilized Humanity

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October 12, 2002, is a historic day in the global war on terrorism: Six years ago, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) carried out the worst terrorist attack in the history of Indonesia—bombing a popular tourist area on the resort island of Bali. Yesterday, three perpetrators of this horrendous crime—the murder of 202 people—were executed.

The executions are a grim milestone in Indonesia's struggle against extremism and terrorism. The decision to impose capital punishment was not easily made. In a democratic country where terrorists cloak themselves in the religious values of the Islamic majority, all but the strongest politicians are tempted to accommodate extremism. But Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono—often criticized for indecisiveness—and the Indonesian justice system—frequently characterized as weak—held firm.

For holding firm in its fight, Indonesia deserves American support.

Following their capture, the Bali bombers proudly acknowledged their crimes, at times even gloating and making light of their deadly achievement. One of the killers smiled repeatedly throughout the trial, mocking the victims' families, while JI continued its killing spree outside the courtroom. Bombings carried out in each of the following three years—on the Jakarta Marriott in 2003, the Australian Embassy in 2004, and again in Bali in 2005—claimed an additional 34 lives.

Then for the next three years, silence. There have been no major terrorist incidents in Indone-

sia since 2005. The 2002 Bali bombing, while a tactical defeat and terrible human tragedy, was a strategic turning point in the Indonesian struggle against terrorism.

Prior to that bombing there were signs of the devastation to come, in the same way that terrorist attacks on America in the years preceding 9/11 presaged greater destruction. The World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the 1998 attack on American embassies in Africa, and the 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole all foreshadowed 9/11. Similarly, in 2000 alone, Indonesia suffered both an attack on its stock exchange and an intricately coordinated series of church bombings on Christmas Eve.

But it was the 2002 attack on Bali that stirred Indonesia. Since then, Indonesia has taken more than 400 suspected terrorists into custody, including, just last year, two leading JI figures: Zarkasih and Abu Dujana. Many of these suspects—roughly 250 of them—have been convicted, and the government has recruited some of them for an innovative “de-radicalization” program whereby prisoners converted from terrorism are used to convert other extremists from their violent ways.

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The Indonesian government, with international assistance, has also established an active and effective counterterrorism unit: Detachment 88. Detachment 88's notable accomplishments include uncovering a major JI terrorist plot on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, which led to the arrest of 10 suspects and seizure of more than 20 bombs, an event largely ignored by most of the American media.

But even as Indonesia is rightly commended for its counterterrorism efforts, it is important to remember that the "war on terrorism" is a misnomer: Terrorism is only a tactic in what is a bigger battle of ideas.

Whatever the fortunes of global terrorism, there remain forces in Indonesia dedicated to the destruction—peaceful and otherwise—of its diverse and tolerant culture. Case in point: In Jakarta this June, 70 were injured when a mob descended on Indonesian citizens commemorating Pancasila, the country's founding creed. Pancasila, a word derived from Sanskrit, enshrines the five philosophical principles of the Indonesian state: Belief in God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, representative democracy, and social justice. Ironically, the assailants, from an organization called the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), confronted their victims at a place meant to unite Indonesians, Jakarta's National Monument (Monas).

The FPI thuggery was, in comparison to most terror acts, minor. But it served a much deeper purpose. It was an attack on the very idea of Pancasila—on the idea that a predominantly Muslim country should be run as anything other than an Islamic state. This is a powerful message with a long history in Indonesia. The light sentences received by the leaders and organizers of the attack were undoubtedly considered a small price to pay.

FPI shares its goal of an Islamist future with JI as well as other extremist organizations and political

parties, including Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, the Indonesian Mujahedeen Council, the Prosperous Justice Party, the Crescent Star Party, and the United Development Party.

It is certainly unfair to equate political parties ipso facto with "terrorist" organizations. It is fair, however, to say that all these groups—violent and non-violent, democratic and non-democratic—share the common strategic objective of overturning the philosophical basis of the Indonesian state and replacing it with Islamic government. And it is not as if operatives among the various groups do not know and associate with one another; these individuals are driven by the cause, not their specific affiliations or tactics. Note, for example, perhaps the most notorious association, that between former Indonesian vice president and chairman of the United Development Party, Hamzah Haz, and Abu Bakar Bashir, former head of JI and the above-mentioned Indonesian Mujahedeen Council.

Defeating terrorism would be a monumental achievement in Indonesia and a great benefit to the world. But the larger war of ideas will be lost if Islamist extremists are able to overturn Indonesia's diversity and tolerance by alternative means.

President-elect Barack Obama is uniquely positioned to support Indonesia's cause. His personal history with Indonesia, his recent electoral victory (which Indonesians perceive as miraculous) and his soaring rhetoric have electrified Indonesians. What he says about Indonesia over the next four years will matter more than the words of any President in American history. The United States, from the President on down, must let its friends in Indonesia know it cares who wins the war of ideas and that it will stand by them as they continue to fight.

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