

Bali and Southeast Asian Islam: Debunking the Myths

Azyumardi Azra

Religious life is often coloured by myths. In fact many religions have their roots in such myths, originating from the enchantment of human beings with gods and nature. Revealed religions like Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (all Abrahamic religions), however, are opposed to myths. Known as a strict monotheistic religion, Islam strongly emphasises the need to keep the faith free from any kind of myth, especially those relating to God, since it could lead to “associationism” (*shirk*), which is one of cardinal sins in Islam.

Images of Islam among both Muslims and non-Muslims are also often coloured by misperceptions, if not myths. This may be so because of historical, sociological and political factors. For the purpose of this essay, a few of these myths that specifically relate to Southeast Asian Islam in particular will be critically assessed.

The first myth, which is still strong among Western scholars and observers, is the “myth of *abangan*”, to the effect that Southeast Asian Islam is not real Islam. The very term “religion of Java” coined by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, to describe Islamic life among the Javanese, reflects the reluctance to recognise the Islamicity of Islam in Java, or even in Southeast Asia in general. Through his distinction of *santri* (strict and practicing Muslims) and *abangan* (nominal Muslims), Geertz argues that the majority of Muslims in Java, or even in Indonesia in general, were

in fact *abangan*. As a result, Southeast Asian Islam historically, sociologically, culturally, and politically is regarded only as a marginal and peripheral Islam vis-à-vis Middle Eastern Islam. Southeast Asian Islam is viewed as an obscure phenomenon and comprising a “thin veneer of symbols attached to a supposedly solid core of animistic and Hindu-Buddhist meaning”. In short, Islam is regarded as having no significant impact on Southeast Asian culture.¹

It is true that Southeast Asian Islam is the least Arabised owing to the process of Islamisation which was generally peaceful and gradual; but one should not be misled about the “myth” of the *abangan*. The reality is that while older local beliefs and practices resisted the continued process of Islamisation, a purer and orthodox form of Islam, nevertheless, did steadily penetrate deeper into parts of the region. A number of scholars did not fail to observe this tendency. As early as the 1950s, Harry J. Benda maintained that the Islamic history of Indonesia (as elsewhere in Southeast Asia) was essentially a history of *santri* cultural expansion and its impact on Indonesian religious life and politics.² Two decades later, Federspiel concluded that over the past four hundred years, Indonesia (as well as Islam in Southeast Asia in general) had slowly been moving towards a more orthodox form of religion, while its heterodox beliefs and practices had declined considerably over the same period.³ Later research by such scholars as Woodward,⁴ Pranowo,⁵ Ricklefs⁶ and others have further confirmed the strong tendency towards Islamic orthodoxy and the blurring of the distinction between *santri* and *abangan*. The process is also known in Indonesia as santrinisasi, something that involves some indigenisation or contextualisation.

New attachments — if not Islamic rejuvenation — can be observed clearly among Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, in the last two decades at least. New tendencies in religious observance, new institutions, new Muslim groups, and new Islamic lifestyles have increasingly emerged during this period. More new mosques with new architecture have been constructed, and they attract full congregations, mostly youth. At the same time, more Muslims have gone for the pilgrimage to Mecca; in fact the number of pilgrims (some 225,000 Muslims) from Southeast Asia is the largest compared to those coming from other areas of the Muslim world. At the same time, more religious alms and donations (*zakat*, *infag* and *sadaqah*, or ZIS) have been collected from well-to-do Muslims and distributed among poorer and deprived co-religionists. New institutions for collecting ZIS have been formed, like the *Dompot Dhua'fa Republika* in Indonesia, which has been phenomenally successful.

The more conciliatory policies of the regimes in Indonesia and Malaysia toward Islam and Muslim groups since the 1990s, have greatly contributed to the rise of new Islamic institutions such as Islamic banks (also known in Indonesia as *shariah* banks, since they operate in accordance with the shariah/Islamic law), Islamic insurance (*takaful*), Islamic people's credit unions (BPR-Shariah, or Bank Perkreditan Rakyat Shariah, and BMT or Bait al-Mal wa al-Tamwil). Malaysia of course developed these Islamic institutions much earlier than Indonesia. But even in Indonesia, "conventional banks" — following the Malaysian example — have also opened *shariah* divisions or branches.

In addition, new, good quality Islamic educational institutions have been established in Malaysia and Indonesia either by Muslim private foundations or by the state. In Malaysia, this includes the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) by the Malaysian government, followed by a number of other Islamic universities and colleges; the latest one being the College University Islam Malaysia (CUIM). In Indonesia Islamic higher education now consists of 33 State Islamic Colleges (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam, or STAIN), established in 1997 in various cities throughout Indonesia. Besides these, there are also 13 State Institutes for Islamic Studies (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, or IAIN) established in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 2002, one of the IAINs, IAIN Jakarta, was converted into a full-fledged university (Universitas Islam Negeri, or UIN). It not only comprises faculties of Islamic studies (religious sciences), but of also Economics, Science and Technology, and Psychology.

These Islamic higher educational institutions undoubtedly play an important role in the modernisation of Muslim society. Owing much to their "rational" and "non-denominational" approaches to Islam, graduates of IAINs, STAINs, and UIN have been recognised by Indonesian society in general as having a progressive, inclusive, and tolerant view of Islam. In contrast, many students and graduates of "secular" universities such as the University of Indonesia (UI) or the Bandung Institute of Technology (Institut Teknologi Bandung, or ITB) tend to be more literal in their view and understanding of Islam. STAIN, IAIN and UIN graduates are very instrumental in the building and spread of Islamic institutions such as the Islamic schools, *pesantrens* (traditional Islamic boarding educational institutions), *madrasabs* (Islamic religious schools), NGOs, and the *Majlis Ta'lim*, or the religious group discussions in offices and society at large.⁷

In the meantime, new, reputable schools and *madrasabs*, such as the Sekolah Islam al-Azhar, SMU Madania, SMU al-Izhar, and the like have also been established in ever increasing numbers since the late 1980s. These Islamic

schools are known as “*sekolah Islam unggulan*” (quality Islamic schools) that are attended mostly by children of the Muslim elite. These schools play an important role in the “re-Islamisation” or “santrinisiation” of Muslim parents.

At the same time, the *madrasahs*, in line with the Indonesian Educational Law of 1989, are equivalent to “secular schools” and *pesantrens/pondoks* have been modernised as well. They now employ the national curricula issued by the Ministries of National Education and of Religious Affairs. It is inaccurate to assume that the *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* have their own curricula that would allow them to teach subjects according to the whims of their teachers or the foundations that own them. Therefore, it is wrong to regard them as the “breeding ground” of Talibanism or extremism as is the case of many *madrasahs* in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The *pesantrens* are now also established in the urban areas; in the past, the *pesantrens* were associated mostly with rural areas and symbolised Muslim backwardness. Furthermore, in the past the *pesantrens* were generally found in Java, but now more *pesantrens* have emerged in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and other islands. The *pesantrens* play a number of roles. They are not only centres of Islamic education, but also centres of social development and empowerment. As a centre of Islamic education, *pesantrens* now offer a variety of educational opportunities. They may take the form of general schools, *madrasahs*, or even provide vocational training up to university. And, as a centre of social development, *pesantrens* conduct programmes and activities related to economic development, social welfare, appropriate technologies for rural areas, etc.

All of these new developments symbolise some of much wider changes amongst Southeast Asian Muslims. Since the 1980s it has been possible to observe the rise of a new Muslim middle class. While there is no specific term used to denote this social category in Indonesia, in Malaysia any member of this rising Muslim middle class is called the “new Malay”.⁸ Even though this new Muslim middle class is heavily dependent upon the regimes, there is little doubt that it has played a significant role in the construction and support of the new Islamic institutions. Furthermore, the new Muslim middle class has been very instrumental in the spread of new lifestyles such as the widespread use of *jilbab* for women, or of “*baju koko*” or Muslim shirts. It has even engendered a new tradition of conducting religious discussions, seminars, and ceremonies in hotels and other prominent places.

Despite all these new “attachments” to Islam, it is important to point out that by and large these have not led to significant changes in political attitudes. The majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia continue to hold fast to the political

arrangements that were achieved in the successive periods of independence following World War II. It is true that after the fall of Suharto, many Islamic parties were established in Indonesia; but they failed to win significant votes in the 1999 general elections.⁹ In Malaysia, while PAS was able to gain ground in the last elections, it is clear that the UMNO remains too strong to oust. It seems that it is almost a myth that the Islamists would be able to wrest political power in both Indonesia and Malaysia. Therefore, it is a myth to exaggerate the strength and influence of the Islamists in the region.

One has to admit that one of the most obvious features of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, is conflict and fragmentation amongst the political elite. Especially in Indonesia in the post-Suharto period, a great number of Islamic political parties have appeared. These parties are involved in bitter struggles not only to gain political power but to also dominate the meaning and interpretation of Islam.

Global Influences

It is clear that in addition to the internal dynamics in Malaysia and Indonesia that contribute to the increasing openness to Islamic influences, global forces have also played an important role. The tendency toward orthodoxy in Southeast Asia had its origins in the intense religio-intellectual contacts and connections since at least the 16th century between Malay-Indonesian students and their co-religionists and *ulama* in the Middle East, particularly in the *Haramayn* (Mecca and Medina). Returning students or scholars implanted a more *shariah*-oriented Islam in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, which forced the so-called “pantheistic” (or “*wujudiyah mulhid*”) Sufism to cede ground.¹⁰ This was the beginning of the rise of a more scriptural Islam, or in Reid’s term, “scriptural orthodoxy” in Southeast Asia.¹¹

The intense contacts between Southeast Asian Islam and the Middle East continued throughout the 19th century. By the end of the 19th century, new waves of Muslim discourse reached the shores of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. Not only returning students, but also *hajj* pilgrims, who from the 1870s travelled in ever increasing numbers to the Holy Land, were responsible. The most important discourse in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago arising from this wave was pan-Islamism. Other waves came in the early 20th century. In particular, a new kind of wave originated from Cairo, which has been categorised as “Islamic modernism”. The spread of this new discourse led to the formation of such modernist Muslim organisations as the Muhammadiyah (1912), al-Irsyad (1913), and Persis (in the early 1920s).¹²

In recent times, the globalising waves that influence Muslim discourse in Southeast Asia no longer stem only from the *Haramayn* or even from Cairo. In fact, the privileged status of the *Haramayn* (or Saudi Arabia as a whole), so far as the discourse of Southeast Asian Islam is concerned, has been eroded in the last few decades. In fact, Wahhabism, which originated in late 18th century Arabia and is the official religious ideology of the modern state of Saudi Arabia, remains an anathema for many Muslims in Southeast Asia. The tradition of Islam in Southeast Asia is simply incompatible with Wahhabi literalism and radicalism. Therefore one should not overplay the influence of Saudi Arabian Wahhabism in Southeast Asia. Even though there are some traces of Wahhabism in the region, they are surely too insignificant to influence the course of Southeast Asian Islam.¹³

Instead, other places in the Middle East, or elsewhere in the Muslim world, have come to the fore and left their imprints on Muslim discourse in Southeast Asia. Thus, since the 1980s the discourse developed by such scholars as Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani and Middle Eastern movements like al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin (and its splinter groups), Hizbut Tahrir and the like have spread in Southeast Asia. The Iranian Ayatullah Khomeini's Islamic revolution in 1979 has also inspired the Islamists in the region to assert their existence.

At the same time, however, Muslim thinkers living in the Western hemisphere such as Ismail al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and others have provided yet another stream of Islamic thought circulating in Southeast Asia. Through their books that have been translated in the Indonesian and Malay languages, they also exert their influence among Southeast Asian Muslims.

It is important to point out that despite all the thought streams coming from outside the region, Southeast Asian Muslim thinkers have developed their own distinctive thought. There is no simple adoption of thought from abroad. In fact, there remain continued attempts among Southeast Asian Muslim thinkers and *ulama* to formulate thinking that has greater relevance with the Southeast Asian historical, sociological, cultural and political contexts. This is apparent in the concepts introduced by Southeast Asian Muslim scholars, such as "indigenisation", or "contextualisation" of Islam in Southeast Asia.

Looking again at the religious, sociological and political realities of Southeast Asian Muslims, it could be argued that there is only a very limited room for radical discourses and movements to play in Southeast Asia in general. Therefore, it is a myth to assert that Muslim radicalism in the Middle East finds a fertile ground in Southeast Asia.

Of course, for some foreign observers as well the international media, the face of Southeast Asian Islam is undergoing significant change. Increasingly, Islam in the region is regarded as being rapidly radicalised; and worse still, the Muslim regions of Southeast Asia are now collectively perceived as a potential “hotbed of terrorism”. This perception, it could be argued, is a kind of myth also. There is of course the potential for radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims, but it is too far-fetched to argue that the region is becoming a “hotbed of terrorism”.

It is probably almost a cliché that Southeast Asian Islam is a distinctive Islam, having a different expression compared with Islam in the Middle East or elsewhere in the Islamic world. In fact, since the 1990s Southeast Asian Islam has been dubbed by leading international media such as *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines as “Islam with a smiling face”. Islam in the region has been generally regarded as peaceful and moderate, having no problem with modernity, democracy, human rights and other tendencies of the modern world.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that according to a report entitled “Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap” released by Freedom House in late December 2001, Indonesia is mentioned as one of the “bright spots” of democracy among dominant or pre-dominant Muslim countries. Whereas there is an apparent “democracy gap” in the Islamic Arab countries, Indonesia and — I would argue — also Malaysia have shown considerable democratic fervent. Thus, the “bright spots” of democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia indicate that by its very nature, Southeast Asian Islam indeed has no problem co-existing with democracy and modernity.¹⁴

However, in post-Suharto Indonesia, discussion and debate on the relationship between Islam and democracy has once again come to the forefront both at the levels of discourse and realities of Indonesian politics. The fact that there have been a number of conflicting political trends since Indonesia entered the democratic realm during the interregnum of President B. J. Habibie until today has also created further confusion about the relationship between Islam and democracy.

Furthermore, rapid political changes that have been taking place at the national, regional and international levels, especially after the 11 September 2001 tragedy in the US, have indeed witnessed the rise of Muslim radicalism in the region. The arrests of a number of individuals and groups in Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Indonesia has increasingly indicated that they have regional links with each other and perhaps with international terrorist groups as well.

The investigation by the Indonesian police of the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002, for instance, has appeared to indicate the complex connections between individuals and groups that carry out violent and terrorist activities. There are at least two conspicuous patterns that have been uncovered. Firstly, some of the perpetrators of the bombings are alumni of the Ngruki Pesantren, the chief of which is Abu Bakar Bashir, who is widely regarded as the spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, the core of radical groups in Southeast Asia. Secondly, some of the perpetrators had been living in Malaysia in the period of Abu Bakar Bashir's self-exile, escaping President Suharto's harsh measures.¹⁵

Thus, the perception of the rise of radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims appeared rapidly after the 11 September 2001 tragedy in New York and Washington DC. This perception grew stronger with the successive events in the aftermath of September 11, especially the Bali bombings that left almost two hundred innocent people dead. The bombings at the McDonald outlet and Haji Kalla car show room in Makasar, South Sulawesi, on the eve of *Id al-Fitr* (5 December 2002), has furthermore confirmed the terrorist tendencies among certain radical individuals and groups in Indonesia.

There is little doubt that events following the 11 September 2001 tragedy have rapidly radicalised certain individuals and groups among Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. The American military operation in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks unfortunately generated momentum for the radicals to assert themselves more strongly. Furthermore, the arrests of a number of suspected radicals in Malaysia, Singapore, and Philippines added fuel to their anger and bitterness toward the US and symbols that they consider as representing American "imperialist arrogance", such as McDonalds or Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets. The Bush Administration's attack on Iraq has further fuelled bitter resentment among the radicals.

In addition to that, political realities in Indonesia have also contributed to radicalisation of certain individuals and groups. The breakdown of law and order and the weakness of central government authority after the fall of President Suharto have provided some room for the radicals to assert themselves. In fact they have attempted to destabilise the Megawati Sukarnoputri presidency, which they have opposed since Megawati's PDI-P won the 1999 general elections, making her the most feasible presidential candidate even though Abdurrahman Wahid subsequently edged her out.¹⁶

Nevertheless, one should not be misled by these current developments. In fact, radicalism among Indonesian Muslims in particular is not new. Even though Southeast Asian Islam in general has been viewed as moderate and peaceful, the history of Islam in the region shows that radicalism among

Muslims has existed for at least two centuries. The Wahhabi-like Padri movement, in West Sumatra in late 18th and early 19th centuries, tried to force other Muslims in the area to subscribe to their literal understanding of Islam. This violent movement aimed at spreading the pure and pristine Islam as practised by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salaf*). The Padri, however, failed to gain support from majority of Muslims. The Padri movement remains the only precedent for Wahhabi-like radicalism throughout Southeast Asia.

The Padri movement represented a shift in the continued influence of Middle Eastern Islam on the course of its Southeast Asian counterpart. As argued elsewhere,¹⁷ from the 16th to 18th centuries, Islam in the Middle East exerted a very strong influence on Islamic intellectualism and religious life in Southeast Asia, mainly through complex networks of Middle Eastern and Malay-Indonesian *ulama*. As mentioned above, the Malay-Indonesian *ulama*, in turn, played a crucial role in the peaceful reforms of Islamic intellectualism and life in Southeast Asia. It should be mentioned, however, that toward the end of the 18th century, the discourse on *jihad* (war) was introduced by such prominent Malay-Indonesian scholars as ‘Abd al-Samad al-Palimbani and Daud ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Patani as a response to the increased encroachment of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. The *jihad* was not directed against other Muslims. Therefore, it is the Padri of West Sumatra who set the precedent for radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims by launching the *jihad* against their fellow Muslims.

Politico-Religious Roots of Radicalism and Terrorism

The root causes of radicalism among Muslims are very complex. The complexity is even greater during the present time, because of many driving factors that are working to influence the course of Muslim societies as a whole. In the pre-modern period, the factors of radicalism were mainly internal. That is, they were a response to internal problems that were faced by the Muslims such as the rapid decline of Muslim political entities and continued conflicts among Muslims. Many Muslims in pre-colonial times strongly believed that the sorry situation of the Muslim world had a lot to do with the socio-moral decay of Muslims themselves resulting from their wrong religious belief and practices; according to this argument, they simply had abandoned the original and real teachings of Islam.

As a result, some Muslims felt it necessary to conduct *tajdid* (renewal) or *islah* (reform) not only through peaceful means, but also by force and other

radical means they considered to be more effective, by declaring *jihad* (war) against Muslims who were regarded as having gone astray. Islam of course emphasises the need for Muslims to renew their beliefs and practices. In fact, in one of his *hadith* (traditions), the Prophet Muhammad states that there would be a reformer or renewer (*mujaddid*) who would come at the end of every century to renew and revitalise Islam. But at the same time, the *hadith* clearly prohibits the use of radical and violent means in the efforts to renew and reform Islam.

One of the strongest tendencies in the discourses and movements in Islamic renewal and reform is the orientation towards pure and pristine Islam as practised by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salafs*). That is why most of the Islamic renewal movements are called “Salafiyyah” (or Salafi, or Salafism). There is a very wide spectrum of Islamic discourse and movements that can be included in Salafiyyah. One can make a distinction between “classic Salafiyyah” and “neo-Salafiyyah”; or between “peaceful Salafiyyah” and “radical Salafiyyah”. The Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula that gained momentum in the late 18th century can be categorised as both classic and radical Salafiyyah. The same can be said of the Padri movement in West Sumatra as described briefly above. The Wahhabi-like Padri movement can be conveniently categorised as “classic Salafism”, in which the internal factors within the Muslim *ummah* were its driving force.

The spectrum of “neo-Salafiyyah” discourses and movements is certainly very complex. The term “neo” in the first instance refers to the period of the modern period, beginning with the harsh encounters between Muslim societies and Western colonial powers from the 16th century onwards. During this period, external factors — associated mostly with the Western world — that incited radicalism amongst Muslims became increasingly dominant. In fact, the West was accused by many Muslims as responsible for many problems that Muslims faced over the past several centuries. Confronting continued Western political, economic and cultural domination and hegemony, many Muslims were afflicted by a kind of defensive psychology that led to, among others, the belief of the so-called “conspiracy theory”.

There were of course outbursts of Muslim radicalism in Southeast Asia in the 19th century and before World War II during the heyday of European colonialism in the region. This was a different kind of radicalism. It in fact comprised *jihads* to liberate Muslim lands (*dar al-Islam*) from the occupation of the hostile infidel Europeans coming from the lands of war (*dar al-harb*). According to classical Islamic doctrines, *jihad* against hostile infidels is justified

and, in fact, is considered as a just war; the *jihads* of this kind are believed as wars in the way of God (*jihad fi sabil Allah*).

Looking at the whole history of radicalism among Muslims, I would argue that the phenomenon is more political rather than religious. In some instances, the original motive could have been religious, but quickly became very political. Political developments in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia after World War II, had been important factors of the rise of new kind of radicalism among Muslims. For instance, disappointed with the Indonesian military policy of rationalisation of paramilitary groups following Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945, Kartosuwirjo, in the name of Islam, rebelled against the government. This was the origin of the Dar al-Islam (DI, or Islamic State) or Negara Islam Indonesia (NII, Islamic State of Indonesia) and Indonesian Islamic Army (Tentera Islam Indonesia/TII) that aimed at establishing an Islamic state, *dawlah al-Islamiyyah*, in Indonesia. Even though the rebellious movement spread to South Sulawesi and Aceh in the 1950s, it failed to gain support from the majority of Indonesian Muslims, who after a bitter struggle in the last year of Japanese occupation, had accepted Pancasila (“five pillars”) as the national ideology. As a result, the Indonesian army was able to crush the radical Islamic movement.

The idea of the establishment of an Islamic state (*dawlah al-Islamiyyah*) is one of the most crucial issues that have periodically occupied certain groups of Muslims in Indonesia. Certain groups among the moderates, such as the Masjumi party under the leadership of Mohammad Natsir, for instance, also attempted to transform Indonesia into a *dawlah al-Islamiyyah*. It is important to point out that these attempts were carried out through legal and constitutional ways, more precisely, through parliament. But the moderates failed to materialise the idea, mainly because Islamic parties were involved in quarrels and conflicts among themselves and therefore failed to gain a majority in the national election of 1955, and thus, by implication, the parliament.

It is important to note that despite that failure, the moderate Muslim leaders have not resorted to illegal means, such as armed rebellion, to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. In contrast, there has been a growing tendency among them to accept Pancasila as the final political reality, as the common platform for a plural Indonesia. At the same time, however, there remain individuals and Muslim groups who keep the idea of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia alive. Depending on the political situation at certain times, these people can operate underground or openly in achieving their goals. They may also collaborate with certain unhappy military elements or even with other radical groups, which, in terms of ideology, are incompatible

with theirs. This awkward collaboration can be called a “marriage for convenience”, or in Islamic terms: “*nikah mut’ab*”. Therefore, one should be very careful in analysing radical groups. Some of them could genuinely be motivated by religious factors, but others could be “engineered” radicals sponsored by certain individuals and groups for their own political ends.

The Suharto New Order regime, at least in the 1970s and 1980s, was not on good terms with Muslim political forces in general. In fact there was a lot of mutual suspicion and hostilities between the two sides. President Suharto took very harsh measures against any expression of Islamic extremism. But at the same time, it is widely believed that certain military generals such as Ali Murtopo and Benny Moerdani recruited ex DI/TII to form “Komando Jihad” (Jihad Command), for the purpose of conducting subversive activities in order to discredit Islam and Muslims.¹⁸

Contemporary Muslim Radical Groups

The fall of Suharto after a rule that lasted more than three decades, has unleashed the idle Muslim radicals. The euphoria of newfound democracy and the lifting of the “anti-subversion law” by President B. J. Habibie, have provided very good opportunities for the radicals to express their extremist discourses and activities in a more visible manner. The lack of effective law enforcement because of demoralisation of the police and military (TNI) has created some kind of legal vacuum that in turn has been used by the radical groups to take the law into their own hands.

Some of the most important radical groups should be mentioned in this account. They are the Laskar Jihad (LJ), formed by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlussunnah Wa al-Jemaah (FKAWJ) under the leadership of Jafar Umar Thalib; the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front, or FPI) led by Habib Rizieq Syihab; the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Mujahidin Council, or MMI) led by Abu Bakar Bashir; the Jemaah Ikhwan al-Muslimin Indonesia (JAMI) led by Habib Husein Al-Habsyi; and the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (Indonesian Party of Liberation, or HTI).¹⁹

It is clear that all of these radical groups are independent and have no connection with established organisations like the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, etc.; nor are they affiliated with Islamic political parties. This indicates that all the radical groups do not trust other established Muslim organisations, both socio-religious and political in nature. This is mainly because in the view of these radical groups, established Muslim organisations are too accommodating and compromising in their political and religious

attitudes given Indonesian realities. In the aftermath of Suharto's fall, political struggles and conflicts among fragmented political groups, as well as between pro- and anti-status quo forces that also involve circles within the TNI, have provided another impetus for the radicals to assert themselves.

It can be suggested that there are at least two categories of these radical groups; the first comprises radical groups that are basically home grown. This includes the LJ, FPI and some other smaller groups. The second category comprises Indonesian groups modelled on Middle Eastern ones, like the JAMI — which has its origins in the al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin in Egypt — and Hizbut Tahrir, which was initially founded in Jordan by Syaikh Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani in the 1950s. Despite this distinction, all these radical groups have a very strong Middle Eastern-influenced ideology that they believe is the most genuine world-view. Therefore, in terms of religious outlook, they subscribe to the ideology of radical Salafism; and in terms of political views, they are believers in the ideology of *khilafat*ism which among their important aims is the establishment of a single, universal *khilafah* (caliphate) for all Muslims in the world.

Even though these radical groups aim to establish a *dawlah Islamiyah* of *khilafah* in the region, they are largely different from the old DI/NII movement in Indonesia. Due to conflicts and splits among the ex-DI/NII members resulting from Indonesian intelligence operations as mentioned above, the present radical groups tend to operate independently from older groups.²⁰

It is important to point out that the *khilafah* and *dawlah Islamiyyah* are conspicuously absent in the discourse of mainstream Muslim organisations such as NU, Muhammadiyah and other big organisations throughout the country. In fact, leaders of these organisations believe that such concepts as *dawlah Islamiyyah* are simply new inventions among certain Muslim thinkers and groups resulting from the Muslim encounter with the modern Western concept and practice of the nation-state. They conclude that the Indonesian model of a Pancasila state is already in conformity with Islam.

Looking at the whole phenomenon of radicalism among Muslims in Southeast Asia, or in Indonesia in particular, it is clear that it has a long and complex history. The history of radicalism among certain Muslim groups, furthermore, shows that there are many factors that are responsible for their extremist tendencies. It is strongly apparent that the motives driving their radicalism are political rather than religious. It is also conspicuous that their radicalism has a lot to do with the disruption of political and social systems as a whole. The absence or lack of law enforcement is certainly an important factor prompting the radicals to take laws into their own hands in the name of Islam.

“Blessing in Disguise?”

The terrorist bombing of Legian, Bali, on 12 October 2002 was certainly a sad human tragedy in contemporary Indonesia. In fact, the bombing reflected a new phase of violence and terror in the country. This could be seen not only in the relatively large number of the victims, but also in the use of lethal explosives by the terrorists to afflict the greatest psychological impact both domestically and internationally. Worse still, there was suspicion that one of the perpetrators was a suicide bomber, reminding one of the Palestinian suicide bombers. It was difficult for Indonesian people in general to accept that certain individuals among them were increasingly becoming so ruthless and inhumane.

But now, after intensive police investigations, the Bali bombing, for several reasons, could well have been a “blessing a disguise”. First, police were able to not only apprehend the alleged perpetrators of the bombing, but to also unearth fresh evidence of the networks of the radicals in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. This revelation was crucial in establishing the fact that in the past several years, the radicals had been working in Southeast Asia, or in Indonesia in particular, to achieve their ends, the most important of which was supposedly an “Islamic State of Nusantara” that would consist of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and, probably also the Muslim area of South Philippines.

The Indonesian police deserved a great deal of credit for working tirelessly to investigate the case with much success. After the unsolved series of bombings since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, the police, with the help of their counterparts from Australia, for instance, were subsequently able to uncover the links of the Bali blast with a number of bombings in the last two years at least.

Second, the revelation of the networks of the radicals by the police in a apparently convincing way silenced most of the sceptics, who from the very day of the Bali blast had maintained that the bombing was simply a US or Western plot to discredit Islam and destroy the image of Muslims in the country. The “sceptics”, some of them prominent Muslim leaders who seemed to believe in the so-called “conspiracy theory”, had in fact accused President Megawati of slavishly surrendering to the pressures and wishes of President Bush of the US in particular.

The disclosure of the networks of the radicals apparently showed that the “conspiracy theory” did not ring true. The statements of Amrozi, Imam Samudra and their accomplices, allegedly involved in the Bali and other bombings, made it clear that the bombings had been motivated by both “genuine”

radicalism and hatred against the US and other Western powers. The fact that the perpetrators showed no remorse for killing the innocent victims further strengthened the perception that they were strongly motivated by their own violent ideology rather than anything else.

Third, the revelation of the networks pointed to the fact that there were indeed terrorists among Indonesians, who happened to be Muslims, who were more than happy to use violent means to achieve their ends. Before the police disclosure, there was widespread reluctance among leaders of Indonesian Islam to admit that there were terrorists among Indonesian Muslims who had misused the teachings of Islam to justify their terrorist activities. In fact some prominent Muslim leaders had issued statements that could have created a wrong impression amongst the public that they were not only defending the radicals, but were also condoning violence and terrorist acts.

Conclusion

It is now the right time for Southeast Asian Muslim leaders, the majority of whom are moderate, to sincerely admit that there is a serious problem of radicalism among certain Muslim individuals and groups. This problem should be fairly addressed by moderate Muslim leaders hand in hand with law enforcement agencies for the sake of the image of Islam as a peaceful religion and of Southeast Asian Muslims as the “Islamic people with a smiling face”. The problems of the radicals are to be seen at two levels; first, the abuse and manipulation of certain Islamic doctrines to justify radicalism and terrorism. The abuse undoubtedly comes from a literal interpretation of Islam. The second problem is the use of violence and terrorism, which undoubtedly runs contrary to Islam.

Therefore, it is time for moderate Muslim leaders to speak more clearly and loudly that a literal interpretation of Islam will only lead to an extremism that is unacceptable to Islam, and that Islam cannot condone, let alone justify, any kind of violent and terrorist act. There is absolutely no valid reason for any Muslim to conduct activities that harm or kill other people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Any kind of resentment and deprivation felt by any individual and group of Muslims cannot and must not justify any kind of desperate and inhuman act.

Furthermore, the moderate Muslim leaders should not be misled by the claims and assertions of the radicals. The radicals are shrewd not only in abusing Islamic doctrines for their own ends, but in also manipulating Muslim sentiment through the abuse and manipulation of mass

media, particularly television. The claims that the arrest of certain radical leaders means the suppression of Islam and the *ulama* are very misleading. Similarly, the claims that Indonesian police investigations of certain *pesantrens* in connection with the bombings represents hostility and suspicion against the whole community of *pesantrens*, are even more misleading.

The identification of radical leaders and groups with Islam and *ulama* is again very misleading. In fact the radicals represent only a small drop in the ocean of moderate Muslims who from their sheer number can be fairly regarded as the true representation of the peaceful nature of Southeast Asian Islam. Therefore, the moderates should be very careful not to support any impression that could lead to the identification of the radicals with Islam and Muslims at large.

Some have argued that the defensive attitude of certain moderate Muslim leaders, particularly in Indonesia, originates from the trauma of political engineering and abuses by the police and military of the Muslims during the Suharto period. This argument does not seem to be relevant to the current political situation. There is no evidence that the Megawati Sukarnoputri regime is hostile to Islam and Muslims. In fact President Megawati seems to be very sensitive to Muslim issues compared for instance to her predecessor President Abdurrahman Wahid, who comes from the *pesantren* milieu. Lacking Islamic credentials, President Megawati in fact prevents herself from making statements, let alone policies, that could spark opposition from Muslims in general.

There is of course a lot of criticism that could be made of President Megawati Sukarnoputri. She is regarded as very hesitant and indecisive in taking any harsh measures against the radicals, because she is worried — it seems — of the possible backlash from the Muslim public. It appears that she does not realise that the moderate Muslim leaders and organisations are more than willing to rally behind her in opposition against any kind of religious extremism and radicalism. This has been made clear by the statements of Hasyim Muzadi (national chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama/NU) and Syafii Maarif (national chairman of Muhammadiyah) since the September 11 tragedy in the US that Indonesian Islam cannot accept any kind of religious extremism. Furthermore, the two largest Muslim organisations, representing some 70 million Indonesian Muslims, have reached an accord to tackle religious radicalism through their various policies and programmes.

As for the police force, it has now become increasingly very difficult for them to practise human rights abuses as in the past. The fall of the authoritarian regime and the rise of democracy in Indonesia have forced the police to be more sensitive to human rights issues and to the protection of the rights of the alleged perpetrators of any kind of violence and terrorism. But this does not suggest that the police are free from heavy-handedness and insensitivity. Therefore, it is the duty of the public to control and watch the police closely in their investigations in order not only to prevent possible wrongdoing and mishandling of suspected criminals, but to also establish credible legal procedures and due process of law.

Therefore, moderate Muslim leaders, while maintaining a watchful eye on police efforts to bring to justice all perpetrators of violent and terrorist acts, should support the police in their investigation. It can be suggested that one of the most important root causes of violence and terrorism in present day Indonesia is the near absence of law enforcement and, worse still, impunity. In fact the vacuum of law enforcement and of decisive action by the police have been an important *raison d'être* for certain radical groups to take law into their own hands through unlawful activities such as raids on discotheques, nightclubs, and other places the radicals believe as the places of social ills.

Above all, the future of moderate and peaceful Southeast Asian Islam is much dependent on the fair, objective, pro-active attitude of the moderate majority to respond to any development among Muslims in the region. A reactionary and defensive attitude is not going to help in the efforts to show to the world that Islam is a peaceful religion and that Muslims are a peace loving people. Again, it is time for the moderates to be more assertive in leading the way to re-establishing the peaceful nature of Southeast Asian Islam.

Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (New York: The Free Press, 1968, originally New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1960).
2. Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation* (The Hague & Bandung: van Hoeve, 1958), p. 14.
3. Howard M. Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam: Islamic Reform in Twentieth Century Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Modern Indonesia Project, 1970), p. 3.
4. Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1989).
5. M. Bambang Pranowo, "Islam and Party Politics in Rural Java", *Studia Islamika* (Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies), Vol. 1, No 2 (1994), pp. 1-19.

6. Merle Ricklefs, *The Seen and the Unseen Worlds in Java: History, Literature and Islam in Court of Pakubuwana II, 1726–1749* (Canberra: AAAS & Allen Unwin, 1998).
7. See Fuad Jabali and Jamhari, eds., *IAIN & Modernisasi Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Logos, 2002).
8. Cf. Syed Hussein Alatas, *The New Malay: His Role and Future* (Singapore: Association of Muslim Professionals, 1996).
9. Azyumardi Azra, “The Islamic Factor in Post-Suharto Indonesia”, in Chris Manning and Peter van Diermen, eds., *Indonesia in Transition: Social Aspect of Reformasi and Crisis* (Canberra & Singapore: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University & Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 309–319.
10. Azyumardi Azra, *The Transmission of Islamic Reformism to Indonesia* (Canberra: AAAS & Allen Unwin, forthcoming 2003).
11. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press); 1988 (Vol I), 1993 (Vol. II).
12. Azyumardi Azra, “The Globalisation of Indonesian Muslim Discourse: Contemporary Religio-Intellectual Connections between Indonesia and the Middle East”, in Johan Meuleman, ed., *Islam in the Era of Globalisation: Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 31–50; Michael F. Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia* (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).
13. Azra, “The Globalization of Indonesian Muslim Discourse”, in Meuleman, ed., *Islam in the Era of Globalisation*.
14. Azyumardi Azra, “Root Causes of the Failure of Democracy in the Muslim World”, pp. 2–3. A paper presented at the seminar on “A Clash of Misunderstandings: Addressing the Root Causes of Islamic Extremism”, jointly organised by The Asia Society and American Indonesian Chamber of Commerce, New York, 7 May 2002; Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap”, New York, 2002.
15. ICG (International Crisis Group), *Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia: The Case of the “Ngruki Network” in Indonesia*, Jakarta/Brussels, August 2002; Muh Nursalim, “Faksi Abdullah Sungkar dalam Gerakan NII Era Orde Baru” [Abdullah Sungkar’s Faction in the Movement of the Islamic State of Indonesia in the New Order Period], Masters of Arts Thesis, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, 2001.
16. Azyumardi Azra, “The Megawati Presidency: The Challenge of Political Islam”, in Hadi Soesastro, Anthony L. Smith and Han Mui Ling, eds., *Challenges Facing the Megawati Presidency* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003).
17. Azra, *The Transmission of Islamic Reformism to Indonesia*.
18. Asep Zainal Ausop, “NII: Ajaran dan Gerakan (1992–2002)” [Negara Islam Indonesia/Islamic State of Indonesia: Doctrines and Movements, 1992–2002],

- Doctoral Dissertation, Postgraduate Programme, Universitas Islam Negeri Jakarta, 2003.
19. Chaider S. Bamualim *et al.*, *Laporan Penelitian Radikalisme Agama dan Perubahan Sosial di DKI Jakarta* [Research Report on Religious Radicalism and Social Change in the Special Region of Capital City Jakarta], Jakarta: Pusat Bahasa dan Budaya & Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah, 2001; Zainuddin Fananie, Atika Sabardila & Dwi Purnanto, *Radikalisme Agama & Perubahan Sosial* [Religious Radicalism and Social Changes] (Surakarta: Muhammadiyah University Press & The Asia Foundation, 2002).
 20. Ausop, "NII".