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Tim Lindsey

## **Australia and the Real Battle for Indonesian Islam**

It is a rare day indeed when former, current and Shadow Foreign Ministers from different Australian political parties see eye to eye, but it is not hard to understand why Alexander Downer, Kevin Rudd and Julie Bishop were united in rejecting Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's recent call to cut Australian aid to Indonesian schools. Australian aid as a percentage of Gross National Income is now just 0.35%, well behind the OECD average of 0.49%. The government has committed to catching up by 2015–16.<sup>1</sup> This paper argues that with all that extra aid money on the way, Australia should, if anything, be planning to expand its support for reform in Indonesia and, in particular, for Islamic education.

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## Indonesia's Real Islamist Threat

Indonesia's success in dealing with Islamist terrorists is impressive, with hundreds of arrests and convictions. Since the first Bali bombing in 2002, attacks have continued but so too have state security responses, supported by the Australian Federal Police. Most of the original leaders of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), including its figurehead, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, are now dead, in prison or facing trial.

Islamist terrorism has, however, been part of Indonesian life since Darul Islam (DI) launched its long-running war to achieve an Islamic state in 1948. Supporters of DI and its many splinters (including JI) are a tiny minority in a nation of 240 million, but they will continue to attack the Indonesian state when they can. Despite their persistence they have little chance of success. Although 80% of Indonesians are Muslim, there exists little popular support for an Islamic state. After Soeharto's resignation in 1998, the vote for parties that identify as Islamic diminished with each election.<sup>2</sup> While Islamist terrorists preoccupy the Australian imagination, they are more peripheral in Indonesian society.

For many Indonesians there are other Islamist organisations that are of much more immediate concern than underground terrorists. These are public organisations of different kinds, from the scholarly to the militant. They share a commitment to enforce very conservative interpretations of orthodox Sunni Islam and, in particular, a regressive version of *syariah* legal norms. Indonesians call them the *garis keras* or 'hardliners'.

Unlike the terrorists, the hardliners are adept at working within the official system and have a real capacity to influence policy. Like the terrorists, their ultimate aim is to replace the state or at least remake it, but they seek to do so from within the system.

They exploit the post-Soeharto democratic state's more open political framework to gradually legislate much of what terrorists seek to achieve with bombs.

The hardliners represent a constituency repressed under Soeharto's New Order that has determinedly reasserted itself since his fall in 1998. A broad range of organisations, they include, among others, MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia), the increasingly conservative semi-official council of *ulama*, or religious scholars, that the state sees as a privileged adviser on Islamic policy; the Justice Welfare Party (PKS, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera), an Islamist political party that has previously said it wishes to create an Islamic state; and quasi-criminal religious vigilante groups like the notorious Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front) or the Forum Betawi Rembug (Betawi Brotherhood Forum), to name just two. Tactics vary between these groups and they do not always march in step, but they share the common goal of enforcing conservative Islamisation. They see liberal Muslims and non-practising Muslims as obstacles to these ambitions, along with Indonesia's many and varied religious minorities.

Pressure from hardliners at the national level has resulted in regulation imposing new restrictions on the building of places of worship that is being used to stop some new churches; legislation imposing an obligation to teach Islam to Muslims in non-Muslim schools; and a Law imposing new (if largely redundant) bans on pornography. At the local level, hardliners have also supported a plethora of moralising and socially regressive regional regulations derived from conservative Islamic norms that impose legal restrictions on, among others, gambling, sale of alcohol, sexual activity, and, in particular, women's dress, public behaviour and freedom of movement.

The hardliners have also delivered a huge increase in 'blasphemy' prosecutions of religious minorities, against a background of increasing violence. A clear pattern has emerged of condemnation by MUI

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of minority religious groups, followed by violent vigilante action and then state intervention to prosecute the targeted minority for religious crimes. Such a process involves breaches of the very human rights provisions introduced by post-Soeharto governments to distinguish themselves from his regime. Most Islamist vigilantes usually escape punishment.

This interweaving and blurring of state and non-state actors and of legal and extra-legal methods presents a more significant challenge to the democratic state than terrorism. Under Soeharto, his authoritarian government stood above society, commanding and intervening as it saw fit. In the *Era Reformasi*<sup>3</sup> that emerged after his resignation, the government finds itself in the middle.<sup>4</sup> The new multi-party system makes minority governments reliant on other parties in the legislature, including Islamic ones, and they look to the hardliners for religious ballast.

There is much debate in Indonesia about whether continuing inaction against religious violence by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his (minority) government is a result of this, or whether they actually sympathise with the hardliners. Whatever the motivation, however, the result is the same. A brief account of state responses to attacks on Ahmadis demonstrates this.

### **Ahmadiyah and the ‘Monas Tragedy’**

Ahmadiyah was founded in the 1880s in what is now Pakistan by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and has been active in Indonesia since the 1920s. Its local followers now probably number somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000.<sup>5</sup> Ahmad is believed to have said himself to be a successor prophet to Muhammad, a claim Sunni Muslims find offensive, and some Ahmadiyah teachings differ from orthodox interpretations of Islam. There have long been tensions between Ahmadis and conservative Islamic groups but they escalated post-Soeharto.

On 1 June 2008, a violent, public attack was launched on a peaceful rally at the Monas (Monumen Nasional, National Monument) in Jakarta. The rally aimed to show that people from a wide variety of religions, races and ethnicities ‘could walk together in harmony’, in accordance with the state ideology Pancasila, which organisers saw as guaranteeing religious diversity. It was endorsed by more than 60 organizations from across the archipelago, including human rights, Christian, Hindu and Islamic organizations and groups involved in inter-religious dialogue. A particular aim of the event was to defend the Ahmadis from persecution, as the government was then publicly discussing banning them.

The rally was attacked by a vigilante gang, Komando Laskar Islam (KLI, Islamic Militia Command), which included members of the FPI. Demonstrators were beaten with sticks, injuring 34 men, women and children of a range of religious affiliations, mostly Muslim, including some senior leaders of liberal Islamic groups.<sup>6</sup> Although arrests were made later and several of the attackers were eventually imprisoned, the thousand or so police in attendance at the rally did little to stop the violence.

The attack, which became known as the ‘Monas Tragedy’, showed that Muslim leaders and organizations are represented on both sides of the contest over the future of Islam in Indonesia. It also showed the state’s reluctance to intervene in that contest, leaving unorthodox groups and their supporters vulnerable. This was confirmed a week after the attack, when a Joint Decision of the Minister of Religion, the Attorney General and the Minister for Internal Affairs was released.<sup>7</sup> Although deliberately vague, the Decision was widely understood as a prohibition of Ahmadis publicly practising their beliefs. The Joint Decision led to similar regulations at the local level, particularly in Java, some of which are even more oppressive.

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Violence against the Ahmadis has since escalated, with Ahmadi mosques and houses burned. In February this year, horrific footage circulated of an attack on an Ahmadiyah community in Cikeusik, a village southwest of Jakarta, in which at least three Ahmadis were killed and five injured.

### Implications for Australia

The rising influence of conservative Islamist groups in democratic Indonesia at the expense of both minority religious groups and wider human rights and law reform efforts is now the subject of major debate in Indonesia. Unfortunately, this struggle within Indonesian Islam has been overshadowed in popular Australian perceptions by issues that resonate more directly with Australian interests. These include action against JI (and, most recently, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir), Australian drugs offenders, asylum seeker arrivals, natural disaster relief, and animal cruelty in Indonesian abattoirs.

The religious tensions in Indonesia have not gone unnoticed by the Australian federal government, however. It has funded a small range of nuanced initiatives supporting moderate Islamic institutions in Indonesia in sectors including education, law and human rights. As might be expected, these have involved AusAID and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Department of Education, the Attorney General's Office and the Federal and Family Courts have also been involved.

Muslim moderates in Indonesia advocating reform in areas such as education, human rights, law, policing and so on, seek substantial support. They often look to foreign donors for this, so as to strengthen their resistance to the vigorous hardliners where their own government does little. AusAID's support for Indonesia's Islamic education system illustrates how this can work in practice.

Indonesia's school system began to disintegrate after the Asian Economic Crisis began in 1997. Things deteriorated such that politicians eventually inserted a clause in Indonesia's new amended democratic constitution obliging the government to spend 20% of the national budget on education. A 'Nine Years Compulsory Education' program was also introduced. Now the government is working to reverse sinking teaching standards but struggles to meet these targets. Islamic schools (madrasah and pesantren) comprise almost a third of the education sector. Typically poorer, they were among the most heavily hit by overall sectoral decline. This has contributed to the rise of Islamist hardliner influence.

In Indonesia, 'madrasah' usually refers to a mainstream (and usually moderate) Islamic school that teaches the government's secular national curriculum across about 70% of its offerings, and receives a trickle of government funding in return. In the best madrasah, children learn English and Arabic as well as Indonesian, sit the national exams and graduate with IT skills, ready to work in a modern economy. AusAID has been active in such schools, supporting programs to strengthen teaching skills and improve learning outcomes.

Unregulated Islamic schools that sit outside the national exam system are usually called 'pesantren'. Some are good, but many are among the lowest-quality schools in Indonesia. Usually poorly equipped, with teachers who are former students and lack any teaching qualifications, the worst pesantren offer a low cost and traditional religious education to poor children, often accompanied by a heavy dose of hardliner radicalism. AusAID's Basic Education Program led to the building and fit-out of more than 2,000 state schools, mostly in poor and remote parts of Indonesia. These offer alternatives to the conservative ideas taught in many pesantren, and give some of the poorest children a chance to sit national exams.

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Madrasah and pesantren feed the national Islamic tertiary system, where, as might be expected, an ideological struggle exists that reflects the wider national one. This is a battle between the moderate liberal reformers who lead the state Islamic universities (UIN) and institutes (IAIN)<sup>8</sup> and those hardliner conservatives working within them. Reformers seek to create a new, modern curriculum that meets global standards. The hardliners resist, wishing instead to produce the next generation of conservative activists and even some militants as well, as was recently shown by the presence of IAIN/UIN students among terrorists arrested recently in relation to a Jakarta bomb plot.

### Conclusion: A Convergence of Interests

Aid projects are rarely acts of pure charity. The best benefit both donor and recipient countries. They fulfil development objectives in the recipient country, but also assist the national interests of the country whose taxpayers pay the bill.

Indonesia's GDP of more than 6% makes it one of the fastest-growing Asian economies after China and India. It dominates ASEAN and, taken as a block, ASEAN has for some time been one of Australia's major trading partners, now second only to China.<sup>9</sup> In fact, as the world's third largest democracy and largest Muslim society, Indonesia is emerging as a regional counterweight to both India and China. This is why the US is now paying Indonesia more attention. More than this, Indonesia is also the key to our northern borders. It controls some of the world's busiest sea and air lanes, which Australia relies on for trade and security. It is crucial to the welfare of the region, and a destabilised Indonesia presents as much economic and strategic peril to Australia as might a hostile Indonesia.

Militant Islamism ultimately seeks to overthrow the Indonesian state. Terrorists may not be strong enough to achieve that goal, but hardliners working within the system certainly threaten a still fragile decade-old democracy and the much older traditions of Indonesia's religious diversity. If Indonesia's education system continues to decay, further hardliner success might wreak great damage to our giant northern neighbour, and to our own interests.

Indonesian studies are already in rapid decline in Australia, weakening our capacity to engage with this vitally important neighbour. In 1972, when the White Australia policy was still in place, there were 1,190 year 12 students studying Indonesian in Australia. By 2010 there were just 1,100, despite our population growing from 13 to 22 million and our much vaunted 'engagement with Asia'. DEEWR even says Indonesian is now on track to vanish from our schools within 8 years.<sup>10</sup>

The federal government seems unconcerned by this, and recently inexplicably decided not to renew funding for Asia literacy in Australian schools.<sup>11</sup> Let us hope that Tony Abbott's ill-conceived comments don't lead to disengagement with Indonesia's education system too. That would only compound the mess we are making of the great competitive advantage geography gave us for the 'Asian century'.

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### Notes

1. See *Summary of Australia's overseas aid program 2011–2012, budget highlights*, at <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/budget/budget11/pdf/budget-highlights-2011–12.pdf>
2. For a good discussion of Islamic party electoral performance in Indonesia, see Greg Fealy, "Indonesia's Islamic parties in Decline", in *Inside Indonesia*, 11 May 2009, <http://inside.org.au/indonesia's-islamic-parties-in-decline/>.
3. 'Reformation Era', the term used by Indonesians to refer to the governments of Presidents B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Soekarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

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4. I am indebted to Julia Suryakusuma for this analysis.

5. The Ahmadis claim to have some 300 branches throughout Indonesia and up to 400,000 followers, see Islam Liberal (2005). *Tentang Kasus Ahmadiyah: Polisi Tidak Boleh Mendiadakan Kasus Ini*, 25 August, at <http://islamlib.com/id/>.

6. Muslim leaders injured included Syafi'i Anwar, Director of International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP); Kiai Maman Imanuhaq, leader of the Pesantren Azzaman; Ahmad Suaedi, Director of the Wahid Institute; and Mohamad Guntur Romli of the Utan Kayu Community and *Jurnal Perempuan*. On the attack generally, see Melissa Crouch (2009). *Indonesia, Militant Islam and Ahmadiyah: Origins and Implications*, ARC Federation Fellowship Background Paper (Melbourne, Centre for Islamic Law and Society, Melbourne Law School, The University of Melbourne).

7. Joint Decision of the Minister of Religion, the Attorney General and the Minister for Internal Affairs No. 3 of 2008, KEP-033/A/JA/6/2008 and No. 199 of 2008 respectively, of 9 June 2008. It provides, in point (2) that 'the organisers of Jemaat Ahmadiyah Indonesia (JAI) for as long as they call themselves Muslims, must cease the spreading of interpretations and activities that deviate from the main teachings of Islam, that is spreading the belief that acknowledges a prophet, with a variety of teachings, after the Prophet Muhammad.'

8. *Universitas Islam Negeri* (State Islamic University); *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (State Islamic Institutes). I am grateful to Jemma Parsons of the Asian Law Centre for research assistance on Islamic education.

9. According to DFAT, in 2009–10, China was Australia's top trading partner, with 17.6% of our two-way trade. ASEAN was second with 15.3% of two-way trade. DFAT, *Composition of Trade 2009–10* p.25 at [www.dfat.gov.au](http://www.dfat.gov.au). See also *Asialink Index 2009*, at [http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/25158/pwc-mi-asialink\\_index2009.pdf](http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0003/25158/pwc-mi-asialink_index2009.pdf)

10. The figures for 2010 (which are half the levels of a decade ago) and the prediction that "Indonesian will cease to exist in our schools" are from Asia Education Foundation/DEEWR (2010) *The Current State of Chinese, Japanese, Indonesia and Korean Language Education in Australian Schools: Four Languages, Four Stories* (see esp. p.13) at [http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/OverArchivingReport.pdf](http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/verve/_resources/OverArchivingReport.pdf). For the 1972 figures, see William Thomas (1974), *Paths to Asia: Asian Studies at Universities in Australia*, Working Papers in Asian Studies, No.6, Centre for Asian Studies, The University of Western Australia, p. 69, which Dr Shannon Smith kindly brought to my attention. For the equally dismal future for Indonesian studies in universities, see David T. Hill (2011), *Indonesian In Australian Universities: A Discussion Paper*, at [http://altcfellowship.murdoch.edu.au/Docs/ALTC\\_NTF\\_Discussion\\_Paper.pdf](http://altcfellowship.murdoch.edu.au/Docs/ALTC_NTF_Discussion_Paper.pdf). For the reasons for the decline, see my article (2010), "Preposterous Caricatures': Fear, Tokenism, Denial and the Australia-Indonesia Relationship", 29 (2) *Dialogue: Journal of the Academy of the Social Science in Australia*, pp 31–43

11. New funding for the NALSSP (National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program), a Rudd government initiative, was not included in the May 2011 federal budget.

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