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Political Islam in Southeast Asia

SCOTT B. MACDONALD AND JONATHAN LEMCO

Southeast Asia is home to a third of the world's Muslim population. Muslims constitute religious majorities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, and smaller communities are found in Burma (Myanmar), Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. Southeast Asia's strategic location between critical Middle Eastern oil fields and energy-hungry East Asia, along with the rise of radical Islamic groups in the Middle East and South Asia during the 1990s and their seemingly greater focus on countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, has made Islam in Southeast Asia an issue of international concern.

There is a danger, however, in lumping Southeast Asia's Islamic tradition with Middle Eastern radicalism. Significant differences exist between the Islamic revivalist movements looking to cultural and spiritual renewal that have swept Southeast Asia in recent years and transnational terrorist networks. Straddling these two extremes are political parties and groups seeking greater autonomy for or the secession of predominantly Islamic regions; some armed, others peaceful and willing to operate within the formal political process. In light of the differences between these organizations and their objectives, putting them into the same geopolitical category can be dangerous.

Those who believe that Islam in Southeast Asia is a potentially destructive force point to a variety of radical Islamic groups, either with ties to Al Qaeda or fellow travelers, that have emerged in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiya (JI), Laskar Jihad, Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), and the Malaysian Military Muslim Group do pose clear and present dangers to peace and stability in Southeast Asia—and to United States national interests. Without strong and effective action on the part of the United States and its allies, these radical groups could destabilize the region, creating an arc of Islamic regimes from the Philippines to Indonesia.

Opposed to this perspective is a view that most Muslims in Southeast Asia will not support radical Islam, and prefer a more moderate path. Although Islam is a political factor throughout the region, Islamic parties do not dominate political life in either Indonesia or Malaysia—the two Southeast Asian countries with Muslim majorities and elected governments. The existence of radical Islamic political groups in Southeast Asia does not itself mean that the region is destined to experience the level of Islamic-inspired violence that has periodically racked the Middle East and Pakistan. Too much Western attention and interference could, however, deepen anti-Western (mainly anti-American) sentiment and possibly provide a foundation from which Islamic radicals could gain power.

Both these perspectives draw from a fundamental reality: Islam is experiencing a regional revival that is largely social and cultural. This revival has been accompanied by the rise of radical groups that are distinctively fundamentalist in religious orientation and anti-American in political outlook, and embrace Islam as an ideology. These groups have a clear-cut preference for the creation of a state governed by Islamic law (*sharia*). Although they are on the political fringe, some are articulate, are aggressively seeking to expand their ranks, and have international connections. (Ramzi Yousef, a key figure in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, maintained a base of operations in the Philippines, where he plotted to

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assassinate the pope and President Bill Clinton, as well as bomb a Philippine Airlines jet.) These radical Islamic groups have made Southeast Asia part of the larger struggle in the war on terrorism.

ISLAMISM IN INDONESIA

The political landscape in Southeast Asia has changed considerably since the late 1990s, which has clearly had an effect on Islam and its place in society. The economic crisis that hit Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines at the end of the 1990s derailed the Asian "miracle," with its focus on economic development. The "Asian Century," constructed around rapid economic growth, improving standards of living, and greater political and economic weight in international affairs, suddenly came to a halt. Throughout the region, poverty rose, as did an undercurrent of social dissatisfaction with local governments.

This was most acute in Indonesia, where the governing Suharto regime was forced out of power in May 1998 after widespread political demonstrations and riots. The coalition that ousted Suharto fragmented into a number of alliances of Islamist and secular nationalist groups. In addition, only part of the former elite—those most closely allied with Suharto and his family—was eclipsed. Many of the old power brokers, such as the military, remained important political players.

With central political authority weakened, long-simmering ethnic-religious tensions, aggravated by the economic downturn, erupted. In parts of the country, such as the island of Sulawesi and the Moluccas, this took on the air of gang warfare as Islamic, Christian, and nationalist groups battled one another. Indeed, there have been accusations that radical Muslim gangs have ties to conservative elements of the political elite, some of whom are willing to supply weapons and money to destabilize the new democratic experiment.

Indonesia's Islamic groups span a spectrum of organizations that range from social and cultural groups, such as the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul, to militant groups, possibly with transnational linkages, such as Laskar Jihad. It is important to underscore that the majority of Indonesia's Muslim community has not been mobilized by political Islam. During the 1999 elections, only 16 percent of the vote went to parties advocating conservative Islamic programs. Furthermore, the more radical Islamic groups in Indonesia are peripheral to the mainstream of Indonesian Islam, which remains overwhelmingly committed to tolerance.

Several Muslim parties in Indonesia are opposed to the militant groups. Five of these Muslim parties hold a quarter of the seats in parliament and play an important role in national politics. All are committed to recognizing the wide array of societal forces operating in the nation—some of them Islamic, some not—and the representation of all legitimate interests. Of course, beyond these five parties are other Muslim political parties—most without representation in parliament—that have platforms calling for an Islamic state and policies antagonistic to other religious communities and to the West.

The Islamists in Indonesia are a collection of generally small groups. They share a literal interpretation of Islam and claim that Muslims should practice only the "pure" Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. This view is backed by an embrace of *jihad* as "holy war" against perceived foes of Islam rather than the more mainstream perception of jihad as meaning to "exert oneself to the utmost" in Muslim activities. While some of the groups that fall into the radical camp existed before the fall of the Suharto regime, many new groups have emerged—some constructed around personalities, others with alleged links to elements of the armed forces (Indonesia's small yet historically influential Yemeni population is also believed to be involved in promoting a radical Islamic stance).

The two key radical Islamic groups in Indonesia are Laskar Jihad and the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI). These two organizations are the heirs of a tradition of radical politics and religion that has usually operated on the fringes of Indonesian society; the fall of the Suharto government and weakened central authority helped them gain larger followings and certainly more attention from a Western press looking for stories of Islamic extremism. The MMI was founded in 2000 by Abu Bakar Bashir, who served prison time during the 1970s for his opposition to Suharto. He eventually managed to escape to Malaysia, where he is thought to have developed ties to the Malaysian Military Muslim Group (KMM), itself opposed to the rule of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed and in favor of creating a fundamentalist Islamic regime in that country. Bashir returned to Indonesia after Suharto was removed from office and is alleged to be one of the key forces behind Jemaah Islamiya, a regionally based Islamist group.

Laskar Jihad functions as a religious-social organization and as a militant group. Originally a con-

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AMERICA AND POLITICAL ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

AMERICA'S INTEREST in eliminating Al Qaeda is changing how the United States and its military allies view Southeast Asia. Since September 11, United States government criticism of human rights records and demands for economic reforms have been largely muted. Military and financial aid have increased. Some analysts have suggested that the current American attitude is reminiscent of United States government policy during the cold war. At that time, staunch anticommunist allies such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand received United States assistance with little interference in their internal affairs. In the past year, the Bush administration has strengthened military ties and signed intelligence-sharing agreements, particularly with its old allies and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The region's nations have pledged to help identify Al Qaeda bank accounts and to crack down on lax immigration enforcement that has made for porous borders.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, has been the main beneficiary of United States attention. The Bush administration is planning to restore ties with the Indonesian military, which were cut by Congress in 1999 because of concerns about human rights violations in independence-seeking East Timor. (East Timor has since gained its independence.)

Ties with Malaysia have also warmed considerably. Bilateral relations soured after 1999, when Prime Minister Mahathir charged political rival Anwar Ibrahim with crimes that led subsequently to what American officials referred to as an "irregular trial." The United States government had also taken issue with the Malaysian prime minister for imposing capital controls during the Asian financial crisis. But now Mahathir has voiced support for the antiterror agenda, and has jailed dozens of alleged militants under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act. Earlier this year, he was rewarded with his first visit to the White House in many years.

Fear of militant Islam has helped Mahathir sideline domestic political opposition (although the opposition is already deeply divided). Opponents of the prime minister have accused him of rounding up legitimate political activists. But from a United States government perspective, these alleged abuses are a necessary cost of the war on terror. The war is also affecting policymaking in Indonesia. Critics charge that the United States is ignoring new civil rights abuses in Indonesia to attract Indonesian support against Al Qaeda. Ironically, Indonesian Muslim groups tend to be strong supporters of American culture, wealth, and influence. But like their coreligionists elsewhere in the region, many Indonesian Muslims believe that United States foreign policy now is aimed at harming Muslim interests worldwide. *J. L.* and *S. B. M.*

servative religious movement founded in the early 1990s by Jaffar Umar Thalib, it became a militant force attempting to create by violent means an Islamic state. Known for his fiery sermons, Thalib gave the organization a strongly anti-American slant, while emphasizing the need to cleanse Indonesian Islam and Indonesia of un-Islamic influences. Along the latter track, Laskar Jihad has been an active force in waging war against Indonesia's Christian population, especially in the Moluccas. Thalib is suspected of having ties to the Malaysia-based radical Islamist groups and is believed to have received funding from Libya and Saudi Arabia. There has also been considerable discussion over possible links to Al Qaeda. Laskar Jihad has denied any ties.

ABU SAYYAF

The Islamic revival in the Philippines has taken a different path. Never a beneficiary of the Asian economic miracle, it has suffered long-standing friction between the Christian majority and a Muslim minority. The Philippines Islamic group that has gained the greatest notoriety has been Abu Sayyaf (Bearer of the Sword), which has its roots in that country's long struggle between Christians and Muslims. Abu Sayyaf was founded in 1991, under the leadership of Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, who studied in Saudi Arabia and Libya. He also trained as a mujahid in Pakistan and fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Somewhere in his travels Janjalani is said to have met and worked with Osama bin Laden. In 1990 he returned to the Philippines and formed Abu Sayyaf from the ranks of dissatisfied members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Muslim guerrilla group that had waged war on the Philippine government in the southern part of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. Like the early MNLF, the group's major objective is to create an independent Muslim nation out

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of the southern islands of the Philippines. Abu Sayyaf was allegedly funded by Al Qaeda in the early 1990s, and bin Laden's brother-in-law, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, is said to have met with the group. In addition, Abu Sayyaf supposedly had links with Ramzi Yousef.

Although Abu Sayyaf was active during the 1990s, conducting small-scale bombing and kidnapping operations, it did not gain international attention until March 2000, when it kidnapped 58 students on the island of Basilan. By that time Janjalani was dead (he was killed in a firefight with government troops in 1998) and his brother, Khadafy Janjalani, had assumed command. The Basilan episode was followed later in the year by another kidnapping of 21 hostages, including 10 foreign tourists. The hostages were freed when Libya paid over $20 million in ransom.[1] Although this ended the hostage situation, the money attracted thousands of potential new supporters to Abu Sayyaf and allowed the group to purchase new weapons. Abu Sayyaf struck again in May 2001, this time kidnapping 17 Filipinos and 3 Americans, one of whom was later beheaded.

After September 11, Abu Sayyaf became a target of the United States, which sent approximately 600 troops to the Philippines to help train the local armed forces in counterinsurgency. (The United States provided President Gloria Arroyo with $100 million in military aid—the first such financial support since the Philippines voted to close American military bases in the early 1990s.) The Arroyo government made tracking down Abu Sayyaf a major initiative. The combination of Filipino troops and United States logistic support put Abu Sayyaf under considerable pressure. A series of skirmishes reduced the group's numbers and in June Abu Sabaya, a senior leader and spokesman, was killed. By late 2002, Abu Sayyaf's ranks had been depleted and its base of support considerably diminished.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S TRANSNATIONAL ISLAMISTS

With a network that encompasses Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiya has emerged as the most extensive transnational radical Islamic group in Southeast Asia. Its objective is to create an Islamic state unifying Muslims in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines. Whereas membership in Abu Sayyaf and Laskar Jihad tends to include those from lower socioeconomic sectors, JI recruits from the ranks of well-educated middle-class men in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Evidently founded in the 1990s by two Indonesians, Abdullah Achmad Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir (a leader of the MMI), JI came to be the meeting ground for radical Islamists in the region. Jemaah Islamiya agents were responsible for a series of bank robberies, hijackings, and bombings of civilian targets. In January 2002, one of JI's key operatives, Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi, an Indonesian, was arrested in the Philippines and charged with bombings in Manila in December 2000 that killed 22 people.

While the idea of societal renewal or establishing a stronger moral base for societies . . . are positive developments, radical Islam is not.

In December 2001, authorities in Singapore arrested 13 JI operatives who were planning to carry out suicide truck-bomb attacks on United States embassies in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Jakarta, along with six other high-profile targets in Singapore. In September 2002, 21 JI members were arrested by Singaporean forces for plotting to bomb the city-state's airport, defense ministry, and water pipelines in the hope of igniting a holy war in Southeast Asia. Most of the JI members were Singaporean citizens. The JI planned to assassinate Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, carry out bombings in the Philippines and Indonesia, and provide logistical support for Al Qaeda members (JI has been previously linked to Al Qaeda).

The existence of JI and its operations in Singapore pose a real threat to that country's government. Singapore is nearly 77 percent Chinese, with a large Malay minority (14 percent of the total population). The largest religious group is Buddhist, with Muslims making up around 15 percent of the population. Surrounded by the larger Muslim states of Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore has always been sensitive to managing its ethnic and religious relations. Although the government has a reputation for ruling with a heavy hand, Singapore is a wealthy society, functioning as a major transportation and offshore-finance hub for Southeast Asia. Traditionally it has been easy to move in and out of Singapore.

[1]Since the 1970s, Libya has maintained ties to Muslim groups in the Philippines and Aceh in Indonesia as part of its international Muslim policy.

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All these factors attracted JI to Singapore. From the city-state it can move throughout the region, establish and maintain a financial network, and enjoy a comfortable base of operations. At the same time, if JI can create tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore, it might be able to incite anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia and Malaysia, which it could exploit in advancing its regional dream of a unified Southeast Asian Muslim state.

FINDING A NEW EQUILIBRIUM

The rise of political Islam represents a challenge to governments throughout Southeast Asia. While the idea of societal renewal or establishing a stronger moral base for societies—some long plagued by government corruption—are positive developments, radical Islam is not. Within the region, difficult developmental challenges and often-rigid political systems have helped fill the ranks of dissatisfied youth, workers, and intellectuals. Outside the region, Al Qaeda has helped raise the flag of an international war against the corrosive influence of the West and its regional allies.

The combination of domestic and external forces has made Southeast Asia a second front on the American war on terrorism. It has brought Washington's focus back to a region that had become a low-priority concern. Both local governments and Washington need to tread carefully in addressing radical political Islam, using military and economic tools to deal with the problem. Failure to reduce poverty and other conditions that help create radicals of any political or religious stripe will not eliminate the Islamists. And failure to use military force selectively and judiciously will leave hardened combatants on the field. The critical question is how to find a new equilibrium in the post–September 11 world that allows a nonviolent role for Islam. ■

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