

“Jihad, Orthodox Islam and Religious Intolerance in Indonesia”

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Andre Vltchek has written more than one article for The Asia-Pacific Journal demonstrating the rise of militant Islamic nationalism in Indonesia, in refutation of many Western media outlets and statements in U.S. foreign policy that would characterize the country as a bastion of human rights and religious moderation in the Islamic world. In the article reproduced here, he indicates several strands that come together to form the religious climate in the most populous Islamic nation in the world. In at least some instances, the rise of intolerance appears to be a matter of religious orthodoxy in the strict sense of the word: for example, the Ahmadiyah sect, a minority group that posits the existence of prophets after Muhammad, has faced concerted pressure by mainstream Islamic groups (who have declared them heretical) and by the government itself (which has prohibited them from publicly spreading their doctrines on the basis of their “deviant” views). Other instances – like the anti-pornography laws of 2008 – seem to combine calls for Islamic sexual morality with opposition to the traditional dress of minority ethnic groups like the Balinese, while offering sweeping new censorship powers to the government.

Jihad, Orthodox Islam and Religious Intolerance in Indonesia

Andre Vltchek

Dozens of green military tents dot the vast campground and jamboree site at Cibubur, a suburb just half an hour's drive from the center of Jakarta. Hundreds of girls, some as young as 15, have called this camp home for almost 6 months. This is where they eat, wash, sleep and study, separated from the rain and mud by the thin fabric of the tents.

Attack on the Evangelical School of Theology

On July 25, 2008, armed gangs from East Jakarta attacked students from the Evangelical School of Theology (SETIA) and their campus in Kampung Pulo. Police refused to intervene and at least 20 students were injured, some with machete cuts. In the following days, staff and students were evacuated even as protestors armed with swords, machetes, bamboo stakes and acid continued to stalk young people. From the outset, the Indonesian media played down the accident.



Muslim demonstrators in Setia (World Divided)

In August 2008, 650 female students were housed in Cibubur—dozens of girls shared each of the huge tents while the water supply and access to toilets in the camp were limited. 600 boys were housed in a so-called transit hotel, inside the city. There was no professional psychological help available, despite the fact that many of the students were recovering from trauma. International coverage was sparse. The US Ambassador visited the camp once, discreetly, making no official statement.



Studying in the camp

Entris, one of the victims of the attack, recalled the events of July 28: “They broke into our place in the middle of the night. For 3 days we tried to hide in the dormitory. We were surrounded and couldn’t do anything. Attackers used stones and firebombs and they even had guns. Some press tried to play it down: claiming that this was not a religious attack, but we all heard what the attackers were screaming: “Go get their people. Fight for your religion.” And the crowd was responding: ‘Jihad! Let’s go—let’s do jihad against SETIA students! Let’s fry them—let’s make satay from them!’ I spoke to the press. We told exactly what happened. We explained everything to TV-One, to RCTI and to other channels and publications. They only wrote and showed what suited them and never anything about the religious nature of the attacks.”

Another girl, Erna, confirmed her friend’s testimony: “They attacked the male dormitory first and later the female dormitory. They shouted from the mosque: “Jihad, Allahu Akbar, attack, kill them, burn them!”



A Student Victim

Several eyewitnesses report that police stood by and watched the attack on 1,200 children and young people, some left on the ground bleeding.

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world. Around 88% of its more than 230 million inhabitants identify themselves as Muslims, most of them Sunni. The manipulation of religion has played an often destabilizing, even destructive role in this young nation formed of the former Dutch East Indies. During the Sukarno period, efforts were made to uphold secularism against Muslim groups seeking to establish a religious state while moderate Islam was channeled through legal political parties. During the military coup in 1965, which was supported by the United States and other Western powers, between 500,000 and 3 million Communists, activists, intellectuals and members of the Chinese minority died in massacres that extended over several months. Leaders of NU, including former President Abdurrahman Wahid,

years later admitted their organization's participation in the events, with Muslim youth groups alongside the military doing most of the killing.

Suharto, in the years after 1965, forced a merger of the Muslim parties (PPP) leaving them emasculated alongside his Golkar Party and the military. Now the Muslim majority is once again flexing its political muscle; sending direct signals to increasingly frightened minorities of other officially recognized religions including Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

Against Secularism

In June 2008, before the attack against SETIA students, members of the radical Islamist Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) attacked secularists at the National Monument (Monas) in Central Jakarta leaving at least 70 people injured.

National Alliance for the Freedom of Faith and Religion (AKKBB) activists had entered the Monas area to commemorate the 63rd year of Sukarno's tolerant Pancasila state ideology when they were confronted and beaten by FPI members, spokesperson of the Jakarta Police told the Jakarta Post.

According to eyewitnesses, some 1,200 police officers at the scene when the clash occurred refused to intervene. To the outrage of the human rights groups and minorities, police later claimed that arresting attackers would have been counter-productive, as it would fuel even wider riots.

For years, FPI had been attacking bars, pork-selling outlets and "deviant and blasphemous" groups and sects under the nose of the police, which in most cases did nothing to protect victims. Even after the Monas attack, despite the pressure from human rights organizations, government Attorney General Hendarman Supandji made clear that the FPI would not be outlawed: "First, we issue them reprimands, then we go to the Supreme Court", he said. President Yudhoyono condemned the attack but refused to take any decisive action to crack down on FPI violence.



FPI demonstrators scuffle with police in Jakarta in 2007 (Tatan Syuflana)

At the press conference one day after the attack, FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab showed no fear or remorse. Instead of apologizing to AKKBB, he turned his wrath against the members of the Ahmadiyah sect, declaring: "We will never allow the arrest of a single member of our force before the government dissolves Ahmadiyah. We will fight to our last drop of blood."

Ahmadiyah and Muslim Minorities

He was referring to an old and well-established Muslim sect with more than 500,000 members—Ahmadiyah—that in recent year had been subjected to repeated attacks, its members threatened, harassed and beaten. Thousands of Ahmadiyah followers in all corners of the country are living under threat after several groups, including the Council of Ulama, declared the sect blasphemous. Their sin seems to be that they believe Mohammad was not the last prophet (according to them the last prophet was Ahmad), contradicting fundamental Muslim dogma. The government, and particularly President Yudhoyono, refused to protect the sect from the attacks led by the radicals, eventually yielding to the ulemas and banning Ahmadiyahs from preaching in public.

“Ahmadiyah arrived in Indonesia in 1925”, explained Zafrullah Pontoh, one of the sect’s leaders. “We were registered in 1953 and between 1925 and 1980 there were no physical attacks on our members. Of course there were many debates between our and mainstream scholars. But then MUI announced their verdict that Ahmadiyah is not a Muslim sect and the attacks began. We were labeled as deviant. Attacks intensified particularly after 2005. Recently our mosque in Sukabumi was burned down. Several of our mosques and schools were demolished and the local government had sealed six of our other mosques. Then 3 cabinet ministers jointly decided that we couldn’t preach openly, because we refuse to accept Mohammad as the last prophet. Indonesian media got involved and as often happens, they misunderstood or misinterpreted the decision of the ministers, claiming that we were banned, while the decision simply said that we cannot preach in public. Months after the decision we are still waiting for the media to cover the story properly. It seems that only foreign journalists, like those from the BBC and CNN, are telling the story as it is. There are increasing numbers of attacks against those who are not part of the Muslim mainstream. It happened to us, it happened many times to Liberal Islam. Shia Muslims here simply do not say openly that they are Shia, otherwise they would encounter the same fate as our people.”

While Ahmadiyah was effectively banned from preaching in public by the government, FPI despite hundreds of attacks against individuals and property was allowed to exist as a legally unsanctioned movement (although Justice and Human Rights Minister Andi Mattalata recently would not answer whether FPI was a legal entity registered with his office). Critics say that the Indonesian state is determined to protect criminals, especially those belonging to the religious majority, and punish the victims.

“There is nothing we can do to stop this”, declared Ditasari a political leader and former head of PRD, the only progressive opposition party in Indonesia. “Indonesia has been hijacked by Islamists and religion is in full control over society. We can’t reverse the process, anymore. We can only slow it down to some degree. You can’t say that you don’t believe in God, anymore. For years atheists were compared to Marxists and Marxists were a legitimate target.”

A 2008 survey conducted by the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace in Bekasi, Depok and Tangerang shows that 56% of the young people in Greater Jakarta support sharia-based laws. And Sharia-based laws are mushrooming all over the country, especially in West Java. They may be unconstitutional, but President Yudhoyono and his government are unwilling to confront them, as several sizeable and well-organized religious groups support them.

“This Presidency is the worst that could have happened to Indonesia”, commented Ditasari. “Not because Yudhoyono is evil, but because he is too weak to confront religious extremism,

corruption and other major problems that Indonesia is facing. He is not willing to take decisive action to defend the constitution. And decisive actions are needed urgently, as Indonesia is right now at a crossroads.”

The Anti-Pornography Law

Faithful to his course of non-confrontation with religious majority, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono signed in December 2008 the anti-pornography bill, ratifying a law that criminalizes any sex-related materials deemed to violate public morality. Signing of the bill provoked an outcry from civil society groups, human rights activists and regional leaders.

According to The Jakarta Post: “...resistance to the law remains widespread, with some provinces—including Bali, Papua, North Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara—rejecting it out of hand... The bill has survived protracted protests from rights activists and pluralist organizations, warning that it could lead to national disintegration. An article that allows members of the public to take action to destroy pornographic material has raised fears that several groups will take the law into their own hands, using it as grounds to justify the use of violence and intimidation.”

Critics warn that the bill is not really about pornography, but about the dress code and lifestyle of several non-Muslim minorities all over the archipelago.

Park ranger I Gede Santika working at Taman Hutan Raya - the largest mangrove protected area in Bali—did not try to hide his outrage over the bill: “I think 100% of Balinese people oppose the bill. If the central government forces us to live in accordance with the bill, maybe we will have to ask for special autonomy. Tourists will not visit Bali anymore as for them Bali means heat and sun and they like to swim here, sunbathe and enjoy running around with as little clothes as possible. Why should we follow Arabic countries - we have our own culture. In Bali, women traditionally wear ‘kebayas’, which will be considered too sexy by some people in Jakarta. But this is our island. In Papua they have their own customs and there is no reason to interfere.”



Balinese hand-crafted clothing



New fashion trend in Jakarta



Boys and girls... boys have the right to choose

The Electronic Information and Transactions Law

This was not the first bill of its kind in 2008. On March 25, the House of Representatives passed a bill banning all pornographic websites, threatening to jail users and providers who will now face up to three years in prison or a substantial fine. Indonesia is a country where one has to read between the lines, as the establishment is never clear about what precisely it is trying to achieve. The new legislation, the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, is not only about censoring pornography. Under the law, anyone found guilty of transmitting false news or racial and religious hate messages on the Internet could face up to six years in prison or a fine of 1 billion rupiah (approximately US\$109,000).

While everyone was discussing pornography, legislators quietly passed the bill, which allows the state to control the flow of information and to persecute any writer, filmmaker or journalist. “False news?” What is false news? In the Indonesian context, based on the country’s tradition, “false” will be any news that is disliked by the establishment. And one shouldn’t expect a law

that prohibits “racial and religious hate messages” to protect minorities from racial abuse and religious discrimination. The bill seems to be designed to protect the majority.

The Ascendancy of Orthodox Islam

In recent years, Indonesia experienced several brutal acts of religious intolerance, including two deadly bombings in Bali, bombing of Australian Embassy in Jakarta, bombing of Marriott hotel in Jakarta, decapitation of schoolgirls in Sulawesi, violence against religious and ethnic minorities in Papua and elsewhere, as well as blocking of churchgoers trying to attend their religious services.

The ongoing government-sponsored “transmigration” project (with similarities to the one used by the Soviet Union in the Baltic Republics), critics assert, is designed to make a minority out of the majority in several non-Muslim parts of Indonesia, including Papua where approximately 60% of inhabitants are now of Muslim belief.

The Islamic Defender’s Front (FPI) and other radical Islamic groups have won their “struggle” to assure that there are almost no bars left in Yogyakarta or Jakarta, except in hotels and other enclosed compounds. While FPI members were plundering drinking establishments, police stood by and watched, whether sympathetic or simply unwilling to intervene. There are calls to make all food “halal”. Now even most of the five-star hotels in the city don’t serve pork.

While in the Middle East and North Africa mosques broadcast only short and often artistic calls for prayer, Jakarta mosques blast entire prayers through loudspeakers. This “educational” process lasts five hours a day or more, recalling certain passages from Orwell. Meanwhile, hundreds of girls from SETIA are still living in isolation in Cibubur.

“There is practically no assistance from the government”, explains 22 years old Santa Maria Perangin-angin, one of the victims. “I think they think of us as the lowest human beings. We don’t ask for many things, but why don’t they treat us differently? President Yudhoyono came to this park to open the ASEAN Jamboree but he did not visit us here although they must have told him that we are living in this compound. At that time, I felt very sad and cried; I felt desperate that we were not given any attention. The President has done nothing for us. There is no justice. I can see this only as a test for my faith.”

“Our people get the worst treatment”, explains one Papuan student who declined to be identified for safety reasons. “Many of us are not Muslim and we are black. As a result, we have to suffer both verbal and physical abuse.”

In August 2007, more than 70,000 members of a hard-line Muslim group held a rally in Indonesia calling for a caliphate—or Islamic rule—to govern the world. Some were promoting regional caliphate that would include Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand. The supporters of the Hizbut Tahrir group filled most of an 80,000-seat sports stadium in the capital Jakarta, waving flags as they heard fiery speeches saying it was “time for the caliphate to reign.” The organization is banned in several Middle Eastern countries, but not in Indonesia.

Throughout Southeast Asia, and even in China, Sunni orthodoxy is everywhere being strengthened by infusions of Saudi money and large doses of Wahhabist doctrine. As Indonesia’s Muslim majority flexes its muscle, it is becoming extremely difficult to continue calling this fourth most populous nation on earth “a tolerant and moderate state”, an expression long used by a complacent international diplomatic and journalistic community in Jakarta.

As economic crises inevitably hit Indonesian shores with full force, there is a danger that 2009 will witness an upsurge of religious orthodoxy that targets the nation's vulnerable minorities.

Andre Vltchek is a novelist, journalist and filmmaker, author of several novels including [Point of No Return](#) and director of a documentary film about Suharto's dictatorship: "Terlena—Breaking of a Nation". From March 1st he will be teaching an online [course on "Indonesia—1965 To Today"](#). He is presently living in Southeast Asia and East Africa.