

Intolerance, Religious Lynchings and the Future of Indonesia

不寛容、宗教的リンチ、インドネシアの将来

Andre Vltchek

Intolerance, Religious Lynchings and the Future of Indonesia

Text and Photos by Andre Vltchek

Twice in the same week two gruesome attacks shook Indonesia and the world. On February 6, 2011, in Cikeusik Village, West Java - more than 1.000 furious Muslims lynched three members of a minority (or, as seen by some Muslims, 'deviant') Islamic sect Ahmadiyah. Two days later, on February 8 in Temanggung, Central Java, a crowd stormed a local courthouse and vandalized three churches after a man - a former priest who allegedly insulted both Islam and Christianity in his pamphlet - was sentenced to five years in prison, the maximum sentence. Protesters demanded the death penalty. A third attack soon followed.



Burned Ceiling of One of the Temanggung Churches

The last kilometers of the journey from Semarang to Temanggung lead through dramatic mountainous terrain, that is if one

takes the badly marked shortcut from Bergas to Bandungan. Winding through stunning rice fields and bamboo groves, this road is beautiful but it would hardly please the piercing eyes of pious religious believers: its edges are dotted with one-hour hotels, karaoke clubs and pubs. In these parts of Central Java it is not uncommon to see lone sex workers descending from the hills along the road, in high heels and short skirts, still shaky after long nights of heavy alcohol consumption.



Vista near Bandungan

Near Bandungan at a tiny intersection a narrow road leads to Gedong Songo - one of the oldest Hindu temples in Java. This magnificent temple was built by the Sanjaya Dynasty, which controlled Central Java in the 8th and 9th centuries. Now Gedong Songo has no Hindu guardians-the staff is exclusively Muslim. Makeshift stalls are everywhere and the locals promote horse rides. The temple hardly conveys a spiritual or religious aura.



Gedong Songo Temple

Approaching Temanggung, police and military vehicles are everywhere. In the centre, armored trucks and troop transporters block one another in front of the modest local police headquarters. Uniformed police and army personnel are patrolling all key corners and buildings, especially the churches. Their presence seems to be unnecessarily heavy now – no mob would dare to attack with even a fraction of such law enforcers in sight.



Too Late

“How many people were arrested?” I ask, actually knowing the number, which is 14.

“Can’t release the number”, answers the high-ranking officer. “It’s still a secret.”

“What are the charges?” I try again.

“Secret,” he replies.



In front of vandalized church - protectors or perpetrators?

The police station is right next to the church – one of those that were damaged on February 8th. Dozens of police officers are crammed into the tiny wooden guard’s shack, smoking clove cigarettes and grinning at those who come to visit. One wonders how the mob could vandalize the church just meters from the police station, and on the same side of the road.

I first go to the Muslim religious leaders. I want to hear their side of the story. What I know is that there was a mildly deranged Catholic priest from Manado, or more precisely former priest, as he actually turned against his faith. One day this priest who was by then living in Jakarta, came to visit his relatives living in this town – Temanggung. Before arriving he wrote a ‘book’, actually a pamphlet, trashing both Catholics and Muslims, comparing (visually) some symbols of Islam to male and female reproductive organs. He distributed some copies to local people. Someone, after looking over few pages, got fired-up and denounced him to the police. The former priest was arrested. What followed was a trial in the local courthouse. The maximum sentence for defaming religion in Indonesia is five years and he was convicted and sentenced to the maximum. Then an outraged crowd stormed the courthouse demanding the death penalty. The Defendant, as well as the judges and lawyers, had to be evacuated. The mob then went on a rampage, desecrating the churches

and trying to set them on fire.



Tafiq Hartono - Speaker of the Forum of United Muslims

“What happened here is actually very different from what people saw on the news”, explained the Speaker of the Forum of United Muslims (Forum Umat Islam Bersatu), Taufiq Hartono. “But even we don’t know up to now what happened. The attacks were definitely provoked by some interests from outside. We don’t know who began destruction of the court. They were not people from Temanggung. None of them were from here. Judging by their dialects, the attackers were from Solo, Pekalongan, Kendal (all in Central Java: author); even from Jakarta. Our people just want to live in peace.”

“Why didn’t the local people who want to live in peace defend the churches?” I asked.

“We were tried to stop the mob, but the attacks were massive. At least 2,000 people participated. Some came in trucks; others by motorbike. We hoped that the police would be able to stop attacks, but they were unable to do so. As far as we know, there were no members of FPI taking part in this action (Islamic Defender’s Front – extreme group responsible for countless attacks on non-Muslims and moderate Muslims: author). The police did very little to stop the mob. The Army arrived in trucks from the city of Magelang 30 minutes

after the violence erupted.”



Protecting the Courthouse - Indonesian style

By the time I arrived, the courthouse had been cleaned of debris. Soldiers guarded the entrance, more than a dozen of them slept on the floor. I managed to sneak in. After some wobbly attempts to appear official and get to their feet, the soldiers fell back on their cartons spread on the floor. Heat and humidity overwhelmed them.

The church near the police station looked much more battered. Statues were desecrated. Half of the torso of Jesus was missing and so were substantial parts of the Virgin Mary. The electric organ was ruined. A wood carving of The Last Supper had several heads, including that of Jesus, cut off.

“Of course there were local people among the attackers”, said local priest, Romo Dwinugraha Sulistya. “But I have to agree that they appeared to have been ordered; commanded. It was not a spontaneous act.”



Parts of Jesus are obviously missing

The priest is remarkably composed, given what occurred recently in his congregation. “The Mob streamed through the streets, destroying traffic signs and converting them to weapons. Some people were carrying swords and stone-throwing slings. Some were armed with cobbles. All symbols of Christianity were destroyed: crosses, The Last Supper, statues of Jesus and Mary. All of our people – all Catholics – were crying when they entered the church. And not only Catholics, also Protestants, even some Muslims; people of all religions cried. At one point I asked everybody to pray together.”



Not much left of them

Once again I asked about the book that fired-up such destructive passions. It was already resting in my bag – a ‘gift’ from one of the members of The Forum of United Muslims – but I had not yet had time to read it.



Father Dwinugraha Sulistya

“When he was distributing the book”, said Father Dwinugraha Sulistya, “I decided to see for myself what was going on, so I sent my assistant to talk to him. After all, he used to be a fellow priest and I wanted to know what exactly he was trying to achieve. But he explained that he did not consider himself to be a priest, anymore. Not even a Catholic! He said he did not believe in Hail Mary, in Holy Trinity and especially in the Catholic Church hierarchy. He still believed in Jesus, but not in the institution of the church. In his book he compared religions; he compared The Bible and the Koran. The first pages were fine, but further on the text deteriorated...”

And so it did, as I found out later, reading the pamphlet in the car that was driving me back to the city of Semarang. But 5 years in prison, or even perhaps the death penalty, for that badly written outpouring of bitterness, produced by someone who was apparently suffering from irreversible loss of faith?



Decapitated Diners at Last Supper

PASURUAN RELIGIOUS ATTACK

As this article was about to go to press, another brutal religious attack shook Indonesia. This time the victims were children – boys from a boarding school in

Pasuruan.

The Jakarta Post – Indonesia’s official English language newspaper – reported that: “A mob of 100 people attacked boarding school in Pasuruan, East Java, on Tuesday, a day when Muslims in the country commemorate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.”

Four boys suffered serious head injuries after being beaten mercilessly by the mob that arrived on motorbikes. Security guards were injured as well and several parts of the school (YAPI Islamic Boarding School) were destroyed.

It appears that the crowd got ‘very angry’ (a common description in Indonesia of the state of people who are about to kill or injure those who do not share the same race or religious belief) because they thought the school was run by Shiites who are the minority in predominantly Sunni Indonesia. In a bizarre twist, later, some public statements made that clerics at the school were actually only ‘sympathetic’ to Shiites but taught Sunni teachings.

I visited the city of Pasuruan just a few days before the accident. I saw the polluted port where local fishermen as well as those from the island of Madura were loading and unloading their catch, as well as illegal logs brought in from the island.

Two steps from the car (before I could even take out my equipment) fingers were pointed at my face, calling me stereotypically ‘albino’ (‘bule’ – a common Indonesian insult to whites). Coolies were twisting their torsos, showing me their backside and making appalling sounds. Children soon joined the adults. I stood just a few steps from the police station where two men in uniforms smoked their cloves, observing the scene. I went there and complained, asking whether they did not consider this a ‘racist incident’. One of the officers blew the smoke in my face and

then spoke with insulting clarity: "This is Indonesia".

I always wonder (being 75% white and only 25% Asian 'by blood') whether I should just swallow these insults while working in this 'moderate and friendly country'. But then I remember all those horrors that non-white people experience in Indonesia - horrors that they have shared with me on many occasions - Papuans (considered 'black' - very 'bad' here), Chinese and even visiting Africans.



Local policeman in Pasaruan insults the author

Then it occurs to me, maybe all this is somehow connected: the loud shouts, the intolerance, the racial and religious attacks, even acts of genocide that are occurring on the soil of this archipelago.

Two days before the attack on the courthouse and churches in Temanggung, a mob in the village of Cikeusik (Banten Province in West Java) began closing in on the house that belonged to the Ahmadiyah Islamic minority sect. The brutal attack was filmed by several mobile phones of the attackers (a very common practice in Indonesia) then distributed on the web. Three people died and seven were wounded.



Zafrullah Pontoh from Ahmadiyah

This is how *The Asia Times* described the video depicting the lynching of Ahmadiyah members in the article "Death To Minorities In Indonesia" by Katherine Demopoulos: *Video footage has emerged showing the murders in graphic detail. First a mob armed with knives, sticks and stones attacked a group of Ahmadis defending a home. Rocks fly, glass shatters, a man smiles for the camera and the overwhelmed police mill about helplessly.*

Later, two men are shown, stripped from the waist down, lying lifeless and muddled on the ground. Blood oozes into the mud, shouts of "Allahu Akbar" (God is great in Arabic) erupt and the attackers launch another savage volley of blows using sticks and bamboo poles, as others use their phones to record it."

I tried to access the video but was asked to prove that I was more than 18 years old. I postponed inspection until the next day but by 14th February the video appeared to have been deleted.

This was not the first time I experienced lynching and torture in Indonesia, indeed, it is difficult to think of other parts of contemporary Asia that rival it in this respect. I still remember the self-congratulatory smiles of the murderers in Ambon (Moluccas), in Solo, Lombok, and East Timor. Many of those committing gruesome crimes are happy to pose

for cameras. They see nothing wrong with their deeds. Recent release of the video of a tortured Papuan man (alleged a freedom fighter) is illustrative of the 'naive nature' of Indonesian brutality: the man had his genitals burned and soldiers were running a knife across his neck, but the military men merrily recorded their deeds, eventually passing the video on.



Lombok church burned down by Muslim extremists on January 17, 2000

In Semarang I talk late into the night with Noor Huda Ismail – the foremost expert on Islamic extremism in Indonesia. Huda himself went through education in a radical *madrassah*, eventually changing course and beginning to help several hardliner Islamic terrorists (potential and actual) to re-integrate into society and abandon militancy. At one point Huda worked as a correspondent for *The Washington Post*.



Noor Huda Ismail

Now he was outraged at what had occurred: outraged by the people of Indonesia, by 'elites' and by Western media and academia, which consistently depicts Indonesia as "tolerant, peaceful and democratic":

"The problem with most Indonesian Muslims is that they don't have their own opinion", explains Huda Ismail. "They follow blindly what leaders say or what the Koran says or the *hadiths* say. They don't apply critical thinking. Therefore, when their leaders say that they are moderate and tolerant followers of Islam, most people just say 'yes' and think that this is correct. Most Indonesian Muslims never act on their own initiative. Ask them something and chances are they will reply: 'Oh, my leader said... Oh yes, the Koran says...' When they say they are moderate, it is because it's what they hear from their leaders. To prove my point, just go to any mosque and ask whether they accept Ahmadiyah!"



Syekh Muhammad Kholil Mosque in Bangkalan, Madura

I actually did. A few days before meeting with Huda, I drove to the conservative island of Madura, not far from Surabaya. There I visited the enormous Syekh Muhammad Kholil Mosque in the city of Bangkalan - built like some lavish palace in the Gulf. I found caretaker - Mohammad Hasan - and asked him what he thought about recent events in West and Central Java and whether he was prepared to accept Ahmadiyah. With no hesitation he replied:



Mohammad Hassan thinks that Ahmadiyah members should be killed but churches should be spared

“Ahmadiyah members should be killed. It is about faith. In Indonesia, we don’t want Ahmadiyah because it deviates from the teaching of the *sharia*. They deserved to be killed because they are destroying people’s faith. When it comes to burning churches, I am against it. We are a peaceful religion.”

To put things in perspective, the reason Ahmadiyah evokes so much hatred among Muslims in Indonesia is because it claims that the last prophet was not Muhammad but Ahmad (Mirza Ghulam Ahmad 1835-1908). Ahmadiyah is an Islamic religious movement founded in India near the end of the 19th century.

Back in Semarang, Huda continues: “We are hiding behind slogans like ‘A Tolerant Islamic State’, but if you go below the skin, we are not tolerant at all. To make things worse, Europeans and Americans are not critical of us. Why: because of our strategic and geopolitical position. For the West, Indonesia can serve as a buffer zone against the rise of China and India. We had proven, especially during the Suharto dictatorship, that we are prepared to ‘talk’ and ‘negotiate’ with the West. Furthermore, Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. So to portray Indonesia as a moderate Islamic nation is useful in challenging existing beliefs in the West about the inevitability of the ‘clash of civilizations’. This is all totally wrong and very much against the interest of Indonesian people. We are Asians – with very different ways of thinking and solving problems. By accepting definitions of ourselves from abroad we are selling our souls to the devil.”

It is true that the mainstream press and academia used plenty of self-restraint for decades with respect to Indonesian religious excesses connected to the genocides in East Timor and Papua, as well as the mass slaughter that accompanied Suharto’s US-sponsored coup of 1965/66 in which between 500.000 and 3 million people died (there has been no official investigation to provide authoritative figures to this day). Seven years ago I discussed the issue with the former President of Indonesia – Abdurrahman Wahid (popularly known as Gus Dur). At that time he was still the head of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama – the largest Muslim organization in the world) and he apologized on camera to the victims of 1965/66 because, as he said “I do not want Islam to go down in history as a bigoted religion.” (Documentary film: “Terlena – Breaking of a Nation”, 2004).



President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)

What he was referring to was participation of the religious cadres (mainly but not only NU) in mass murder of 1965/66. During that time, Indonesian Islam became an ally of Western interests in the region – destruction of Communism and all progressive parties, movements and individuals – therefore becoming untouchable. It was also promoted as ‘peaceful’ and ‘tolerant’. The next stage of cooperation came with Afghanistan – when numerous *jihadi* cadres from Indonesia were in the forefront of the fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The mainstream media in the West had chosen to largely overlook major milestones and indicators that were warnings of increasing intolerance inside Indonesian society under pressure from the main religion of the land.

Abroad, there was almost no coverage of July 25, 2008 attack against the Arastamar Evangelical School of Theology (SETIA) that kept more than one thousand children living in tents for almost a year (The US Ambassador visited the site but did not even bother to produce an official communiqué). There was very little of coverage of burning churches, of the National Monument ‘accident’ (when National Alliance for the Freedom of Faith and Religion [AKKBB] activists had entered the Monument area to commemorate the 63rd year

of Sukarno's tolerant *Pancasila* state ideology and were confronted and beaten by extremist FPI members right in front of the police).



SETIA students were forced to live and study in tents

Since the secular clauses of the Indonesian constitution were ignored and violated by the introduction of *sharia* law in Aceh, Tangerang and other provinces, very little had been said and written.

Two recent attacks changed the atmosphere.

"Indonesia - Land of Tolerance or Terror?" read the headline of Huffington Post on February 14, 2011. The article begins with this summary: "Indonesia once hailed itself as a moderate, diverse nation that protects freedom of religion for all its citizens, with a national motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*," meaning *unity in diversity*. Three months ago, President Obama praised Indonesia as a model of religious tolerance when he said that Indonesia and the United States share principles of unity and tolerance. The grim reality, however, is that Indonesia is losing the right to call itself a tolerant nation that promotes or protects diversity. Instead, due to failed policies, its government has allowed a real militant threat to grow within its borders." A description of the events follows:

"Hard-line extremists are literally getting away

with murder, as their vile attacks result in no punishment. At the root of the problem is Indonesia 's misused 1965 Blasphemy Law, which makes it unlawful 'to, intentionally, in public, communicate, counsel, or solicit public support for an interpretation of a religion or a form of religious activity that is similar to the interpretations or activities of an Indonesian religion but deviates from the tenets of that religion.'"



Temanggung after attacks

Even usually tame press agencies this time offered some substantial coverage.

While there is little prospect that substantial criticism will come from abroad, opposition may yet grow from the ranks of Indonesian clerics themselves, some of whom are still inspired by the social secularism of deposed President Abdurrahman Wahid, who passed away December 30, 2009.



Prof. Yusny Saby at home in Aceh

In his house in Banda Aceh, Professor Yusny Saby from Islamic University (IAIN) Ar-Raniry is speaking with sadness and bitterness about many Indonesian Muslims: "We always have religion but not necessarily spirituality. Many in Indonesia claim that Islam is the solution, but we Muslims often create the problems ourselves. Look at our country now. It is said that corruption is *haram*. But corruption became an essential part of our culture. And nobody does anything about it - there are no role models."

Almost no one looks to President Yudhoyono — twice a student at Fort Benning, platoon commander in occupied East Timor, and general during Suharto's dictatorship — for substantial positive changes. He is considered 'weak', but in fact he is powerful in stubbornly refusing to implement any significant reforms (including in the judiciary) in a society that still moves by deadly and destructive inertia after Suharto stepped down in 1998.

Katherine Demopoulos writes:

Government passivity in dealing with the attacks is also an issue, says Lutfi Assyaukanie, co-founder of the Liberal Islam Network and a lecturer at Paramadina University. "The roots of the problem lie in the

firmness of government and in the religious authority. We are a big nation with no big leader. SBY [Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono] doesn't do anything. Only statements, statements, statements."

Assyaukanie says the leadership of Indonesia's two main Muslim organizations, Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, is "so weak" and "very political". He says the Indonesian Council of Ulemas (MUI) is also to blame because in 2005 it reiterated a fatwa (edict) denouncing Ahmadiyah as heretical.

In the meantime, my email and text message exchange with some leaders of Ahmadiyah dried out; at least for the time being. After countless attacks and the recent murder, they do not feel like debating the issue. They are in mourning and scared.

Mr. Asep, one of the members of Ahmadiyah in Sukabumi did text me: "We are concerned. Islam is a peaceful religion. It was never supposed to be put in the service of anarchy."



High security prison Porong, East Java, where some terrorists are doing time

Academic and Catholic priest Romo Baskoro from PUSDEP in Yogyakarta offered his thoughts on the issue: "Recent violence against religious groups in West and Central Java reminds us of two things: One: In Indonesia religions have the potential to be a constructive power for the nation. Two: but at the same time certain groups to serve their own interests could manipulate religion. Evidence indicates that point number two is a strong suspect behind the violence. Whoever is responsible must be brought to justice."

But who is behind these attacks? I covered countless outbursts of violence and intolerance all over the archipelago. No one ever took responsibility. It was always 'them' - provocateurs, some invisible interests and hands. I saw real hands holding machetes, cutting into people's flesh, mouths screaming insults and threats. I would be more convinced if responsibility was at least spread equally between those 'unknown forces' (that in Indonesia always remain conveniently 'unknown') and those who are actually openly beating people, killing, cutting them to pieces. The second group also, somehow miraculously, never gets punished.

Former President Abdurrahman Wahid once told me on the record that he knew who blew up The Hotel Marriott in Jakarta in 2003. According to him these were not Islamic fundamentalists - but security forces, the branch of which would better not be named in this article. But why then was no one arrested, charged with murder and tried?

The problem remains that Indonesian society is exceptionally passive when it comes to fighting injustice.

Despite the tremendous outcry of the Twitter Community in Indonesia (social network groups are thriving here, becoming they have become a status symbol for middle and upper classes) - the social networks were unable to organize more than 100 lonely figures to protest the

recent deadly events in the rain in front of the legendary Hotel Indonesia.

Huda Ismail has a compelling suggestion: "Instead of listening to empty praise, it would be much better for the Indonesian government to accept that we have serious problems here and finally deal with it!"



Church community consoles itself

In Temanggung, Ibu Priyati sits at the back of the church destroyed by fire. There is a determined look on her face: "We are only human so of course we are afraid, but we know that we can rely on God that is great. Almost all the members of the church returned here after the attack."



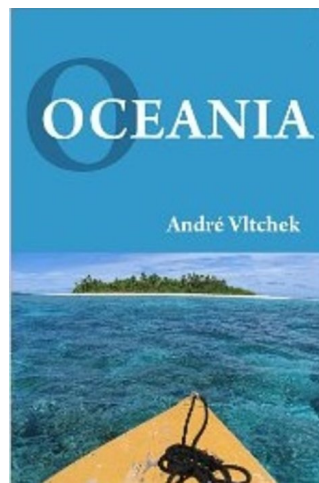
Lavish mosque interiors in one of the poorest countries in Asia

Relying on God was not what the founding father of Indonesia – Sukarno – had in mind as the way forward for the nation. A religious man himself, he strongly believed in socialism and ‘nation and character building’; he believed in secularism and in secular justice. It may be time to revisit old slogans from the independence era; ideas and pillars on which Indonesia was supposed to stand before the brutal interruption of its natural development in 1965. It is highly unlikely that the Indonesian archipelago will succeed in achieving peace, prosperity and justice under the leadership of those who served faithfully during the years of darkness and terror.

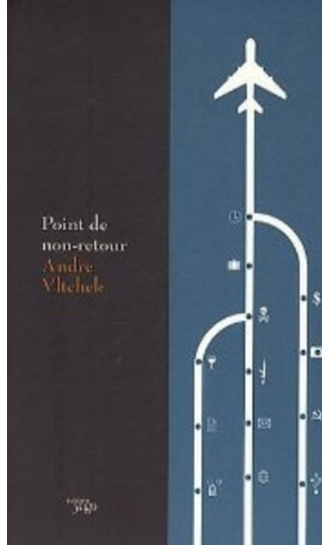
Andre Vltchek – novelist, filmmaker, investigative journalist, author of numerous books and documentary films. His latest non-fiction book – *Oceania* – deals with western neo-colonialism in Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. His latest novel about war correspondents and Latin American revolution is available in *French*.

©Andre Vltchek. Text and photos may not be reproduced without consent of the author.

Recommended citation: Andre Vltchek, Intolerance, Religious Lynchings and the Future of Indonesia, The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 8 No 2, February 21, 2011.



Click on the cover to order.



Click on the cover to order.