



letter
from Berlin

BY DR FARISH A NOOR

Is this the new face of terror in Asia?

Ever since the militant group Jemaah Islamiyah came to the public's attention following the Bali bombings of October 2002, researchers, analysts and politicians have wondered aloud about the group's origins and modalities of operation. Following the arrest and interrogation of some of the JI's leaders and members — including those alleged to have taken part in the planning of the Bali attacks — it has come to light that women have also played an important role in the organisation's set-up.

Several names have come to the fore, including those of Noralwizah Lee Abdullah, Munfiatun al Fitri and Mira Agustina, who happened to be married to members of the JI or are related to them as daughters and mothers. Research done by organisations like the International Crisis Group (ICG) has shown that some women actually do play an important role in organisations such as the JI, perhaps not in the front line of their violent activities but certainly in the background as supporters of the movement and providers of communications and logistics.

In all these cases, we are confronted by a phenomenon that baffles social scientist and feminists alike: How and why do these women — many of whom happen to be well-educated, and with economic agency and capacity of their own — choose to marry men who are committed to a social reform project that is carried out through violent means and whose ultimate objective is the creation of a social order that would place women like them in a secondary position?

That groups like JI and the other radical movements of Indonesia have opted to include women into their operational and logistical structures should not strike any of us as surprising. After all, practically every single political organisation in Indonesia today opens its doors to women who are seen as important actors and agents for socio-political change, and even the most conservative male-oriented Patriarchal organisations like the JI would be foolish to downplay or underrate the role that women can play as auxiliary figures in their activities. JI in this respect is no different from mainstream groups like Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama, or parties like the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) that also bring women into their fold.

Once married and integrated into groups like the JI, it is clear that some of these women play a pivotal role in cementing the movement together and maintaining links between the members and disparate cells that operate across the Indonesian archipelago and beyond. Through marriage links the JI has maintained its network that stretches to Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and further afield to Pakistan, Egypt and the Arab world. In the case of women like Mira Agustina and Munfiatun al Fitri, it is not even clear if emotional attachment figures at all in the marriages they contracted with their spouses, and that their marriages were merely instrumental alliances that served a larger political cause than their own.

However when addressing the thorny issue of women's involvement in militancy, we need to ask whether gender is at all a useful framework for us to work with. It would be futile, in the opinion of this analyst, to seek answers to female involvement in terrorism in any notion of "female psychology", even if it is pursued to the level of micro-biographies that seek explanations in terms of personal histories, personal motivations etc. To try and explain the phenomena of "female terrorism" as if it were a separate subject of enquiry altogether would miss the mark, for the real question is how and why do religio-political movements move from the mainstream to the radical register in the first place.

It goes without saying that women have the same rational agency and will as men do, and that given the chance some of them would probably want to do exactly what the men of their organisations have been doing all along. But here free will and rational agency are tempered and limited by the operational parameters and scope

of activities allowed by the respective organisations themselves.

Terrorists are not anarchists, and thus far we have not a single case of a radical militant in Indonesia going rogue and taking unilateral action on his part. Groups like the JI have rules and regulations of their own, like any other well-organised institution, and the members are allowed to act only as far as these internal rules allow them to.

Asking the hypothetical question of whether there will be female suicide bombers in Indonesia in the future therefore has to take into account the operational parameters and limits of the groups they belong to, and the answer will only be found when the leaders of these groups decide that the time has come to send women out to the field as suicide bombers — which applies in the case of male bombers too, obviously. What has yet to be answered is the question of how and when did the JI decide that suicide bombing was an acceptable means of warfare? And if the JI has made the transition to suicide attacks, why hasn't the other radical groups in Indonesia?

In the final analysis, it is these operational limits that determine whether we will see female suicide bombers in Indonesia in the future: Attempting a pathology of female suicide bombing or female terrorism as a phenomenon on its own right may actually detract us from the real issue, and only offer us over-generalised pathologies based on a narrow gender-based essentialism that will not get us anywhere. ☺

Dr Farish is a Malaysian political historian working on the phenomenon of politicised religion in Asia. He is based at the Centre for Modern Orient Studies (Zentrum Moderner Orient) Berlin. feedback@asia-inc.com