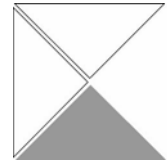


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Friends Indonesia doesn't need

by Farish A. Noor



All in all, the attack on the Australian embassy was a sordid, despicable incident which will be misrepresented to suit the interests of the powers that be. If Azahari Husin and JI leaders were indeed involved, they are short-sighted pawns who have been used to further other people's interests

The bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, has dealt yet another blow to a country already struggling to recover from the economic and financial crises of 1997-98 and the aftermath of the Bali bombings a couple of years ago. Just when Indonesia seemed to be on the verge of making the transition to a working democracy, it has received the unsolicited attention of the friends it doesn't need.

Thus far all fingers seem to be pointing to the mysterious Jama'ah Islamiyah network, which is said to span the entire Southeast Asia with most of its members coming from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. While it is still too early to arrive at any conclusions, some observations can be made:

If the bombing was indeed the work of the JI, some questions need to be raised about the mindset of its members. What do they intend to accomplish and what do they expect the final outcome to be. Thus far, from what little we know, it would appear that the JI believes that Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the other countries of ASEAN should come together as a greater Islamic state that governs by Islamic law and promotes and defends Muslim interests. They are, it is alleged, willing to do anything to further this objective and think nothing of the risks — including worsening economic, political and diplomatic relations with other states.

Also, if this should be the case, one needs to answer a host of other questions. What about the will and desires of the rest of the Indonesian population? Even as most Indonesians strongly oppose Australian government's cavalier approach to regional politics and acceptance of a role as America's 'sheriff' in Asia, they'd rather express their opposition to Australian foreign policy in a very different way. And millions of Southeast Asians certainly do not want to live in a pan-ASEAN caliphate ruled by leaders picked by the JI.

Azahari Husin and Noordin Mohammad Top have been named as suspected masterminds behind the Australian embassy bombing as well as a similar attack on Marriott Hotel. What can Azhari, an academic (allegedly turned bomb-maker) having a working knowledge of global politics, expect from such actions. These actions obviously do little to improve Indonesia's international standing and image. If anything, it has made the political and economic situation worse. With friends like these, who need enemies?

To compound an already rotten situation, the attacks on the Marriott Hotel and now the Australian embassy have merely strengthened the hand of the US and Australia vis a vis Jakarta and the Indonesian state. The Bali bomb attacks had helped Australian government milk the sympathy for the deaths of Australian tourists. While it cannot be denied that the Australians who died there were innocent civilians, one must note that Indonesians themselves were the primary victims. Besides human losses, local economy has suffered enormously. The Bali bombings also pushed Jakarta closer and deeper into the clutches of the American and Australian governments, who used the incident to pile even more pressure for tighter security regulations in the country. The net result has been more repressive and anti-democratic laws in the name of anti-terrorism and public safety. If JI members thought that their attack was a blow against the 'evil West', they should think again. It was an own-goal by any standards.

The latest attack against the Australian embassy in Jakarta has given the Australian government yet another stick to beat the Indonesians with. In the weeks to come, as Indonesia moves towards its presidential elections and the temperature is set to rise yet again, the Australians will undoubtedly apply more pressure on Indonesia to work against what they see as extremist groups.

Besides diminishing and belittling Indonesia's image abroad, the terrorism has allowed the Australians to ride the moral high horse and once again play the 'sheriff' in Asia. Worse, it has allowed the Australian government to preach from a lofty height while conveniently forgetting the role it played as America's ally in the region during the Cold War and as a tacit supporter of the Suharto regime.

The Australian government has become yet another unwanted friend of Indonesia, advising Indonesians on how to deal with their 'terrorist problem'. But can we forget the role played by Edward Gough Whitlam, the former Australian prime minister, and Richard Woolcot, the former Australian ambassador to Indonesia, during the invasion of East Timor in 1974. It was they, along with former US president, Gerald Ford, and former US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, who stood by and did nothing when President Suharto — along with military leaders like General Wiranto and General Benny Moerdani — planned and led the invasion of East Timor that led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. Where were the USA and Australia when Suharto and his generals unleashed a regime of state-sanctioned terror on the people of East Timor? Or do atrocities count for 'terror' only when Europeans are the victims?

All in all, the attack on the Australian embassy was a sordid, despicable incident which will be twisted and misrepresented to suit the interests of the powers that be. If Azahari Husin and JI leaders were indeed involved, they are short sighted pawns who have been used to further other people's interests. The killing of any innocent civilian is haram (forbidden) in Islam. When such killings end up being exploited to further weaken the country one hopes to serve, all that can be said is that they are not just shameful, but also counter-productive and downright stupid. Indonesia simply does not need friends like these.

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