

Narratives of Terrorism in Indonesia through the 2002 Bali Bombing: a fragile equilibrium

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Abstract

Indonesia is the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world. On 12 October 2002 the country was the victims of a large-scale terrorist attack, which with three different explosions caused the death of more than 200 people and as many injured.

The government had shown ambiguous attitudes towards the phenomenon of terrorism up to that point. How would the government react, both in word and deed, to the evidence that the problem directly involved the country?

Given the difficulty in finding primary sources in English, such as official statements and newspaper articles of the time, the search is based almost exclusively on secondary sources, ranging from academic material to online resources. Therefore, it must be considered as a possible starting point for future research on the public narratives of terrorism in Indonesia.

The historical context

Dealing with extremist terrorism in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon. Although the begin of Indonesia's own "War on terror" arises almost simultaneously with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the country dealt with domestic act of violence perpetrated by non-state actor at different moments of its existence. In fact, many organization tried to upset, on the one hand, the territorial integrity of the country, and, on the other hand, the so-called *Pancasila*, the five principles on which the Indonesian constitution is grounded. The *Pancasila* doctrine has been criticized and opposed several times from the most integralist components of the Muslim majority of the country, sometimes bringing together separative territorial claims and interesting in upsetting secularism. (i.e., Free Aceh Movement)

The country lived under the authoritarian rule of President Suharto for more the 30 years (1966-1998). throughout this period political Islam has been placed in the corner of the political arena, but during the transition period following the resignation of President Suharto (*Reformasi*), Islamic parties and organizations became once again relevant in the political life of the country. Despite the difficulties, the country has successfully managed to create a pluralistic political system. It is necessary to underline how the country, which hosts the largest number of Muslims in the world (more than 200 millions), has historically been

oriented towards tolerance and religious pluralism. This is demonstrated by the behavior of the country's major Islamic organizations, such as *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), which strongly criticized terrorist attacks. However, the transition period has left room for several attempts at subversion, also through the illegitimate use of force. These efforts perpetrated by radical organizations culminated in the 2002 Bali Bombing, which provoked 202 fatalities and 209 injured.

By then, the country was headed by a coalition government, with Megawati Sukarnoputri as President (From the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, PDI-P, a secular party), while the vice-president was Hamzah Haz (The United Development Party, PPP, an Islamic Party).

The narratives before the 2002 Bali Bombing

Creating a narrative of terrorism was certainly a complicated exercise in the country, mostly when these acts had a clear religious, or anti-religious, matrix. The opportunity to express the position of the Indonesian political class on the phenomenon of terrorism was offered to President Megawati Soekarnoputri at the most fervent moment of the beginning of the War on Terror. The Indonesian leader was in fact visiting the White House in September 2001, the week following the 9/11 attacks. The visit shows us an extraordinary exercise of

political balance. On the one hand, improving relations with the United States represented an essential strategic objective for a country that was attempting a democratic evolution after thirty years of crude dictatorship and that has suffered for the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. On the other hand, Sukarnoputri was also the representative of the most populous Muslim nation in the world, and despite the Indonesian constitution is basically secular, it remains impossible to ignore the fact that her statements would have aroused much interest within the country.

The joint statement, issued at the end of the visit, testifies how the Indonesian president stressed the importance of distinguishing extremist acts from the Islamic religion, a religion of peace.¹ Furthermore, Soekarnoputri expressly emphasized the importance of keeping the views of the Islamic world in mind, so that the United States could lead an appropriate response to the 9/11 events.² In these statements it can be seen that the message that Soekarnoputri intended to return to his listeners in Indonesia, albeit in a veiled and ambiguous way, was a substantial criticism of Islamophobia and the American reaction.³

Similar responses were also issued by two important Indonesian politicians, namely Defense Minister Matori Abdul Djilil, who affirmed Indonesia's neutrality with respect to the war in Afghanistan, and by the Minister for Security, and

¹ *Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Indonesia on Terrorism and Religious Tolerance*, September 19, 2001 (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/WCPD-2001-09->

² *Ibidem*

³ Kornelius Purba, *Remembering the 9/11 tragedy and terrorist attacks on Indonesia*, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta, September 11 2021.

future President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who instead claimed that Indonesia would offer limited support for the War on Terror, and would not accept that it could jeopardize "World Peace".⁴ A final important piece of the narrative preceding the Bali attacks came from the Vice President Hamzah Haz, ally but rival of Soekarnoputri, known for having used Islam and extremists for his own political gain.⁵

Hamzah Haz, following a meeting intended to verify the United States' assertion on terrorism in Southeast Asia, in the presence of various leaders of terrorist organizations, including Abu Bakar Ba'asyir (leader of *Jemaah Islamiyah*), allegedly said that these organizations sought only to "promote the inclusion of religion in the life of Indonesia".⁶

These statements, read together, give an idea of what the dialectic was on this divided issue, but which would become central in the debate in Indonesia.

The keys elements are:

1) A defense of Islam and Islamism

⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-10-05-34-indonesia-66436107/550513.html>

⁵ Smith, Anthony L. "INDONESIA IN 2002: Megawati's Way." Southeast Asian Affairs, ISEAS - Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2003, pag. 99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27913229>., Cfr. also: *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack: An In-depth Investigation Into The 2002 Bali Indonesia Bombings*, The Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies, 2007, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/50173/07_Bali.pdf

⁶ *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack: An In-depth Investigation Into The 2002 Bali Indonesia Bombings*, cit., pp. 25-26

- 2) Recognition of the 9/11 attacks, but no recognition of the involvement of Islam as a religion.
- 3) Critique of the American and Western narrative.
- 4) Underestimation of the danger for Indonesia.

The Aftermath of the Bali Bombing

Evidently, the Bali bombing of 12 October 2002 had strong consequences in Indonesia.

First of all, it caused the shift, at least momentarily, of the attention of the international media in Indonesia, both because of the size of the attack, but also because of the international affiliation of the victims.

The positions of Indonesian political leaders before the attack had caused various criticisms from the countries already deployed in the War on Terror, first and foremost the United States. It was necessary for the most illustrious representatives of the government to change their position, however, apart from the condemnation of the attack, the tone towards the Islamic extremists did not change significantly.

An element that emerged a few weeks after the attention of the President's desire to involve the largest Islamic organizations in the country in the fight against terror "by promoting the image of Islam as a cooperative and peace-

loving religion".⁷ Despite this, the Soekarnoputri government was made up of different souls, and some elements went by themselves, trying to carve out a role within Indonesian political life also by exploiting the propaganda opportunity offered by the attack. In particular, there were conspicuous reactions in relation to the attempted arrest of Bakar Ba'asyir.

The latter, alleged leader of the group (*Jemaah Islamiyah* - JI) held responsible for the attacks, was among the first persons to be detained by the police following the events in Bali (20 October). Bakar Ba'asyir's detention was soon followed by popular demonstrations of solidarity, and government members followed this trend.⁸ For example, Vice-president Hamzah Haz was quoted as saying: "If you want to arrest Abu Bakar Bashir you will have to deal with me first."⁹ Moreover, also Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who will be praised for being a hard-liner against terrorist acts during his presidency, had to falter in expressing his own idea of JI's very existence.¹⁰

In addition to these statements, other suggestions on the government's public position can be traced, for example through the government's refusal to designate JI as a terrorist organization, while more than 50 United Nations'

⁷ Ali Muhammad, *Indonesia's Way To Counter Terrorism 2002—2009: Lesson Learned*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.18196/jgp.2014.0018>

⁸ *The Global War on terrorism: An assessment*, Washington Headquarter Services, DoD,, 2006, pag. 100 (https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Other/15-F-0940_DOC_02_the_Global_War_On_Terrorism_an_Assessment_December_2006.pdf)

⁹ Tony Parkinson, *Jakarta's day of reckoning*, *The Age*, October 14/2002. (<https://www.theage.com.au/national/jakartas-day-of-reckoning-20021014-gduor0.html>)

¹⁰ Sheldon Simon, *Elections, Unrest, and ASEAN Controversies, Comparative Connections*, Volume 6, Issue 4, January 2005. Cfr. also; *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack: An In-depth Investigation Into The 2002 Bali Indonesia Bombings*, cit., pag. 23

member states decided to do so.¹¹ Another element that supports this vision of the Indonesian government as substantially ambiguous and indecisive in the management of the phenomenon of terrorism emerges from an ASEAN summit held a few weeks after the events in Bali.

In the Summit a declaration was approved that still takes up a central point of the Indonesia's government narrative of terrorism; in fact, one of the point claims that the organization:

*deplor the tendency in some quarters to identify terrorism with particular religions or ethnic groups.*¹²

The most important measure adopted by the government was to issue an anti-terrorism law (Interim Law No 1 of 2002 on the Eradication of the Crime of Terrorism) that was also supposed to be applied retroactively to the Bali attacks. Analyzing the contents of the law, it is not traceable any intention to seek a precise ideological or religious matrix. In fact, the formulation is so general that the borders in which it could have been applied were not very vivid.¹³

¹¹ *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack: An In-depth Investigation Into The 2002 Bali Indonesia Bombings*, cit., pag. 23

¹² Ali Muhammad, *Indonesia's Way To Counter Terrorism 2002—2009: Lesson Learned*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.18196/jgp.2014.0018>

¹³ Simon Butt, *Anti-Terrorism Law and Criminal Process in Indonesia*, ARC Federation Fellowship 'Islam and Modernity: Syari'ah, Terrorism and Governance in South-East Asia' Professor Tim Lindsey Background Paper #1, pag. 4

(https://law.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1546327/AntiTerrorismLawandProcessInIndonesia2.pdf)

While it is evident that the central government attempted to deliver an ambiguous message, the steadfastness through which the administration acted was subsequently praised by most international observers.

Therefore, there is a gap between the public position and the action taken by the government, Of which the 2002 law bears witness, since among other things, it also provides for the death penalty (which will be effectively applied) for the crime of terrorism.

Findings

As far as it was possible to trace the public position of the government, two points emerge substantially.

On the one hand, it is undeniable that the Bali attack caused a strong change in attitude towards terrorist acts, which until recently were underestimated, or even denied. This was certainly due to the government's desire to prevent the escalation of the phenomenon of terrorism and any claims that it would bring with it. Equally important was international pressure. Most of the victims were foreigners, and they were certainly the target, considering that the chosen place was Bali, the tourist resort *par excellence*. Furthermore, terrorism was a growing phenomenon in the Western world, and Indonesia did not want to deliver an

image of itself as a fertile country for the growth of parastate organizations which are avowedly enemies of the West.

Second, the government's reluctance to verbally condemn religious extremism emerges, even if in fact this is not the prevailing sentiment within Indonesian Islam. This is testimony to the intrinsic weakness of the government, which led the country in a phase of transition, and which could not possibly alienate a legitimacy ground that included religious components, despite the degree of moderation or extremism.

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