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In Indonesia, Democracy Isn't Enough

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THE coordinated bombings of popular tourist areas in Bali, almost exactly three years after similar attacks there, signal that an outbreak of democracy in the Muslim world will not necessarily be enough to destroy Al Qaeda's viral movement or even to diminish its reach.

If anything, the entrenchment of democracy has weakened Indonesia's willingness to fight terrorism. The country's minority-led democratic government, whose very survival requires the support of Islamic parties that range from the militant to the mainstream, has spent the period between the two Bali attacks waffling in its response to terrorism for fear of alienating these Muslim parties and a largely anti-American populace. Such lack of resolve augurs ill for American efforts to promote democracy as an antidote to terrorism elsewhere in the Muslim world.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono insists that the terrorists responsible for Saturday's bombings will be hunted down. The previous president made similar protestations following the 2002 bombings. But only six weeks ago, an Indonesian court reduced the jail time of Abu Bakar Bashir -- allegedly the spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, Al Qaeda's main ally in the region -- and those of 18 others convicted for their roles in the 2002 bombings. Although Bashir was implicated in a Jemaah Islamiyah plot to overthrow Indonesia's previous government, and despite independent testimonies from senior Jemaah Islamiyah operatives in American and Indonesian custody that he approved the Bali bombings and other terrorist operations, he will soon walk free after just 26 months in custody.

The day of the court's decision, I conducted an interview with Bashir at Jakarta's Cipinang prison. He was surrounded by acolytes, including the bombers who struck a Jakarta shopping mall and the Philippine ambassador's residence. The speaker of Indonesia's parliament, along with many Muslim leaders, including moderates, had previously visited Bashir to show solidarity with this victim of pressure and interference by the United States and Australia. But there can be no doubt that Bashir is a very extreme thinker who inspires deadly actions.

At 66, Bashir is lanky and bespectacled, with a strong voice, an easy laugh, and an air of vulpine gentility. His family, like Osama Bin Laden's, traces its roots to the Hadramawt region of Yemen. He explained that it was America and Australia, in collaboration with Israel, that actually planted the big bomb that killed so many people. Those Indonesians convicted of the earlier Bali bombings had in fact used only small bombs to warn that drugs and other Western excesses

wouldn't be tolerated. "Nevertheless, I call those who carried out such actions all mujahid," or holy warriors, Bashir said. Their attacks, he insisted, were "self-defense" against Western predations in the Muslim world.

Bashir expounded a radically new interpretation of Islam: "No deed is nobler than jihad. None. If we commit to jihad, we can neglect other deeds." Nor is there any end in sight to what Bashir sees as an intractable "clash of civilizations." According to the Koran, he explained, it is destiny for Muslims to fight Jews and Christians until the end of time: Westerners must be destroyed unless they accept Islamic government. He claimed he had recently sent a letter to President Bush pointing out that because of this destiny, the West's battle is pointless and unwinnable.

Asked if he were the leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, Bashir smiled. "That wasn't proven at my trial," he replied.

In fact, Indonesian intelligence has authenticated a 1998 letter to regional jihadi leaders, in which Bashir and another figure associated with Jemaah Islamiyah claimed to be acting on Bin Laden's behalf to advance a global jihad against Jews and Christians. Nonetheless, President Yudhoyono has said that he cannot submit legislation to parliament proscribing Jemaah Islamiyah because there is insufficient proof that the group exists. At the same time, he warns that more terrorist attacks may come.

That seems more than likely, to judge from the accounts I received from self-proclaimed mujahedin in Java and Sulawesi. They report that Jemaah Islamiyah has set up a suicide squad to conduct large actions against Western interests, over the objections of some group members who reprehend killing civilians.

IT cannot possibly be in the Indonesian government's interest to continue to shelter an organization with such violent intentions. But the country's officials may have concluded that it is even riskier to support American policies. According to the latest survey conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, Indonesian views of the United States, which were largely favorable before the invasion of Iraq, plummeted to 15 percent favorable right after. In Pew's June 2005 survey, 80 percent of Indonesians feared that the United States would attack their country.

Fortunately, the Pew figures also reveal positive trends that suggest another way forward for the United States and its allies. In three years, Indonesians' support for suicide bombing has declined from 27 percent to 15 percent, and confidence in Osama bin Laden is down from 58 percent to 35 percent. I

If one American policy can be correlated with improvements in Indonesian attitudes toward the United States, it is aid for tsunami victims in Aceh. The Pew polls suggest that, largely because of the American role in tsunami rescue and relief, Indonesia is now one of the few nations where a majority believes that American actions sometimes consider other nations' interests. Since that time, support for combating terrorism has doubled to 50 percent, as Indonesians focus on the dangers they face rather than on distaste for American policies.

These polls indicate that popular sentiment remains volatile, and that the anti-Americanism that helps drive jihadism is not necessarily permanent. But it would be a mistake to presume that the tide of history will simply carry countries like Indonesia toward democratization and away from militant Islam. Groups like Jemaah Islamiyah, which promote equal economic opportunity, as well as social and political advancement through educational achievement and personal piety, hold real appeal for citizens in this part of the world. To compete with that appeal, Muslim governments must address the often frustrated aspirations of their bulging youth populations.

As for the West, in order to win its conflict with jihadism, its leaders must creatively endeavor to buck the tide of history rather than simply pretend to ride it. After all, that is the way our own democracy was born.

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