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**Muslims, Politics, and Violence in Indonesia:
An Emerging Jihadist-Islamist Nexus?**

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Foreword

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous nation and third largest democracy, is also the world's largest Muslim country and a pivotal state in Southeast Asia. Given its size and importance, including its strategic location, Indonesia is critical to stability in Southeast Asia. It has been the anchor of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and a key player in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the only organization in the Asia-Pacific region that brings the United States together with Japan, China, ASEAN and others to discuss security issues. Indonesia is also home to about \$25 billion in U.S. investment, hosting more than 300 major U.S. firms. This year the country has undergone two steps in what is the largest single election in the world—legislative elections in April, and the first round of Indonesia's first-ever direct presidential election in June. The final step, a second-round presidential run-off, takes place this month.

Among many significant trends in this democratic transition, none is as pressing as the rise of political Islam, in both moderate and radical guises. During the 30-year New Order period, President Suharto's relationship with Muslim groups was marked by political expediency; he sought their support when he needed it, but otherwise adopted a philosophy of secular rule that kept Muslim groups and their agendas under control. In the transition to democracy since Suharto's fall in 1998, the moderate Islam embraced by the majority of Indonesians helped to lay the foundations of civil society. The absence of strong political leadership since Suharto's fall, however, has allowed the flourishing of radical Muslim groups seeking to promote an Islamist agenda, including *sharia*, (Islamic law). While some of these Islamist groups have pursued their goals through legal channels such as elections and legislation, others, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, a terrorist group with ties to Al Qaeda, and Laskar Jihad, have used intimidation and violence.

In this NBR Analysis, Dr. Zachary Abuza traces the development of Islamism from a "politically emasculated social phenomenon" to a counter-force to the state, which in the eyes of many Indonesians has failed to pursue economic and political reform. Dr. Abuza argues that Islamist political parties are effectively using public policy, while withdrawing overt references to Islam and *sharia*, to implement a social agenda that gradually erodes secular institutions.

Emphasizing that radical groups expand their membership and support base primarily by deepening people's religious devotion rather than their political ideology, he argues that understanding the Islamists' religious worldview, which generally is not a priority of policy analysts, is nevertheless essential to the discussion of how to deal with them.

Indonesian public opinion of the West and America soured dramatically in the wake of the U.S.-led wars on terrorism and in Iraq. Dr. Abuza contends that by moving into the political mainstream through capitalizing on the resurgent anti-Western sentiment, Islamist groups are gaining influence and increasingly setting the agenda, while moderates and the "silent majority" of Indonesians merely react, reluctant to speak or act effectively against the radicals.

Dr. Abuza concludes that because the majority of Muslims in Indonesia are still moderate, the country can be expected to remain a model of tolerance, secularism, and pluralism in the short term. There exists real cause for concern and caution over the longer term, however, because 1) Indonesian Muslims are showing evidence of greater piety, devotion, and conservatism than in the past, 2) radical Islamism is making inroads through various means, 3) economic performance remains poor and unemployment high, and 4) anti-Western sentiment may remain significant. Given these realities, the "pond" for recruiting young people into radical groups is both "wider and deeper" than ever before. He stresses the need for the Indonesian government to promote tolerance and pluralism while "surgically" striking against Islamists who espouse violence, in order to allow democracy to take hold and political institutions to develop to the point that they will effectively be able to meet the challenges of sustaining a strong and pluralistic society.

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Zachary Abuza

During the New Order period, political Islam was largely suppressed by President Suharto in an effort to consolidate Indonesia as a secular state. Since then, however, it is emerging as a powerful force for political change. Democratization has allowed increased political space not only for moderate Islamic parties, but also for more radical Islamist groups and militant jihadists. Among these are Jemaah Islamiyah—which is suspected of maintaining links with Al Qaeda—and Laskar Jihad. These groups seek to secure the national implementation of *sharia* law, defend what they perceive as Muslim interests, and ultimately create a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia. By tapping into the growing Islamic consciousness of Indonesia’s population, these groups have found a “deepening” and “widening” pool of recruitment. This has been a major factor contributing to increased terrorism and greater sectarian violence in Indonesia’s rural provinces. Moreover, while pledging its support in the war on terrorism, the Indonesian government has often been reluctant to take action against these groups for fear of any political backlash and widespread anti-Western sentiment. Indeed, many leading politicians regard these groups as co-religionists or fellow nationalists. The role of religion is often left out of studies of terrorism and sectarian violence in Southeast Asia, but it is one that merits reassessment in view of the conservative Islamic revival within Indonesia and the steady gains made by Indonesia’s Islamist political parties.

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Introduction

Islam in Indonesia has always been defined by tolerance, moderation, and pluralism. Whereas in the Middle East Islam has been seen as anathema to democratization, in Indonesia, Islam created the foundations of civil society that made the transition to democracy possible. As Robert Hefner has eloquently argued, Islam was the force of civil society that facilitated Indonesia's transition to democracy.¹ The burgeoning of civil society is positive, but the loosening of constraints on it has allowed "uncivil" society to flourish as well. Most Muslims in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, support the secular state, and only a small minority advocates the establishment of an Islamic regime governed by *sharia*, or strict Islamic law. Most Indonesians eschew literal interpretations of Islam and violence perpetrated in its name. Indeed, Muslim thinkers in Indonesia have made some of the greatest intellectual and theoretical contributions to the debates over Islam and human rights, Islam and democracy, and Islam and women's rights. Nonetheless, political violence has sharply escalated in post-Suharto Indonesia and is increasingly associated with the rise of political and radical Islam.

The fall of Indonesian President Suharto radically altered the political environment in the archipelago. The strongman's resignation left a weak democracy in which there was intense political competition between interim president B.J. Habibie and his successor, moderate Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid (better known as Gus Dur), and a parliament that had a newfound and intense sense of empowerment. Under the New Order regime (1965–98), the Indonesian Parliament (DPR) had "very little input in either the formulation or implementation of state policy. Nor did the DPR exercise vigorous oversight of the executive branch."² Suharto's successors have often been stymied by a parliament that is no longer quiescent. Strong central government control also broke down as the provinces clamored to redress the historical legacy of over-centralization and demanded more autonomy and revenue sharing. Indonesia's Big Bang decentralization of 2001 has had profound effects. As the World Bank notes, "Within one year, the Big Bang decentralized much of the responsibility for public service to the local level, almost doubled the regional share in government spending, reassigned two-thirds of the central service to the regions, and handed over more than 16,000 service facilities to the regions."³ Yet the local governments had weak administrative capabilities, having been emasculated under the New Order regime, wherein local government coexisted with branch offices of a larger and more powerful central government that controlled resources.

¹ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

² Ramlan Surbakti, "Formal Political Institutions," in Richard W. Baker, Hadi Soesastro, et al., eds., *Indonesia: The Challenge of Change*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999, p. 68.

³ The World Bank, *Decentralizing Indonesia*, Report No. 26191-IND, June 2003, p.i.

Political violence, mostly perpetrated by the state, was routine under the New Order regime. Since Suharto's fall, political and sectarian sub-state actors have also wracked the country with violence. The causes of this are multifold. They include the breakdown of the overly centralized and authoritarian New Order regime, as well as the abolition of the *dwi fungsi* (dual function) role of the military (TNI), which previously enjoyed a direct role in civil administration. The split of the Indonesian National Police (INP) from the TNI in 1999 has also led to political violence, as competition between the two over scarce resources and attempts to discredit each other have hampered cooperation.⁴

Previously, the country's best human intelligence network was run by BAIS, the military intelligence service. Since 2000 the police force has been forced to develop its own network of informers. The civilian State Intelligence Bureau, (BIN), likewise has a tense relationship with both the INP and BAIS, competing over jurisdictions and budgets. BIN is infuriated that the police, which denied the existence of Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cells before the terrorist bombing in Bali on October 12, 2002, is now receiving significant international assistance.

Communal resentment over the New Order policy of *transmigrasi* (transmigration), the forced relocation of Javanese to the more sparsely populated outer islands, has been another important source of conflict. Long simmering resentments over land, local political control, and economic disparities erupted into intense violence in several locations in the archipelago beginning in 1997, as communities sensed the sudden decline of central government control.⁵

The central government, for its part, was too concerned with its own future and maintaining political stability. While the transition to democracy in Indonesia has been successful and relatively nonviolent, it has also at times been chaotic. Three presidents have held office since 1998, and some institutions such as the TNI have lost their formal political power, while others, such as the parliament and local governments, have seen their power suddenly increased.

Finally, a corrupt and relatively ineffective judiciary has limited the ability of the state to prosecute acts of violence. Time and again, militants have been acquitted, charges dropped, or light sentences received. For example, no sentences were handed down with the signing of either the Malino I or Malino II accords that attempted to end sectarian violence in the Malukus and Sulawesi, while militant leaders such as the Laskar Jihad's Jafar Umar Thalib

⁴ Kevin O'Rourke, *Reformasi: The Struggle For Power in Post-Soeharto Indonesia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002, pp. 395–97.

⁵ Jacques Bertrand, "Legacies of the Authoritarian Past: Religious Violence in Indonesia's Molouccan Islands," *Pacific Affairs*, Spring 2002, pp.57–85; O'Rourke, *Reformasi*, pp. 395–97.