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Indonesia attack a surprise or not?

Explosive end to a four-year hiatus, any false sense of safety

Simon Roughneen in DENPASAR, Indonesia.

Despite the July 16 terrorist attacks on Jakarta's JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotel, Indonesia's tourist hub Bali seems as bustling as ever, with beaches packed and the downtown Kuta market doing its usual roaring trade.

At the ever-busy international airport, swine-flu masks and checks aside, the only sign of any additional concern was the 45-minute queue for holiday-makers to get their visas, which took somewhat longer than usual as officials ran vigilant eyes over travel documents. Otherwise, however, there was little sign of extra security presence, such as sniffer dogs, with security and customs conducting nothing more than routine bag inspections.

Still, airport Police Chief Agung Merdita was quoted in local media as saying, "We are maintaining the level-one alert in Bali until further direction from the central police force in Jakarta."

Later, after midnight on Legian in downtown Kuta, site of the 2002 Bali bombing in which 202 people died in an attack by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), there was little sign of concern, with beach-tanned tourists bar-hopping just yards from the memorial, itself attracting late-night visitors who posed for photographs in front of the plaque listing victims' names.

Indonesia thought it had more or less beaten terror at home. As Kumar Ramakrishna, author of the just-published "Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia" (Praeger Security International, 2009), told The Washington Times:

"There had not been any significant attacks of this nature since the October 2005 Bali attacks. What this shows is that the wider ideological milieu that gives rise to JI remains potent, and as long as this remains the case, the network will be able to replenish its ranks and mount further attacks."

Indonesia has made remarkable progress since ousting long-time tyrant Suharto during the political and economic storms of 1998. It has become what some regard as "Southeast Asia's most vibrant democracy," as East Timor's President Jose Ramos-Horta put it to me in a July interview in Dili, Timor-Leste.

Numerous national and regional elections, all free and fair, have been held in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. Indonesia's real gross domestic product has averaged about 6 percent annual growth since 2004. Corruption, low foreign direct investment and poverty limit the country's prospects, but year-on-year statistics for first-quarter 2009 put Indonesian economic growth at 4.4 percent, even as trade-oriented neighbors such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand all shrank.

Indonesia is clearly still vulnerable to terror attacks by affiliates of al Qaeda, be that JI or its purported splinter groups. The latest Jakarta attacks are thought to be the work of fugitive Noordin Mohammed Top, who split from the apparently cowed JI to found his own al Qaeda in Indonesia.

C. Holland Taylor is chief executive officer and founder of LibForAll, which supports moderate Muslims aiming to promote religious tolerance in their countries. Speaking to The Times from Jakarta this weekend, he noted, "The chutzpah of terrorists who checked into the hotel* and assembled their bombs on-site. In retrospect, this is obvious, but the hotel security clearly was not prepared."

Despite undermining the JI network in recent years, with most of the spadework done by the elite Detachment-88 unit, supported by U.S., Australian and Singaporean police, it remains the case, as Walter Lohmann of the Heritage Foundation said, that "the good guys have to be right 100 percent of the time, and the bad guys only once."

Indonesian Islam is generally syncretic, with many adherents retaining aspects of old Javanese or other regional cultural and religious forms side by side with Islam.

Indonesia's official ideology remains Pancasila, which gives equal status to five religions. Political Islam has many manifestations in Indonesia. Nationwide organizations such as Nadlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah have more than 70 million members between them, and according to Mr. Taylor, both work hard at keeping tabs on extremists.

However, the recently elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has been criticized for not doing enough to curb more radical elements that are doubtless present on the vast, 17,000-island archipelago.

U.S.-trained former Gen. Yudhoyono, known by his acronym SBY, weakened JI by winning cooperation from captured terrorists, who then convinced former comrades that the government is not un-Islamic and rewarded former terrorists with school fees for children and status as political prisoners.

Rohan Gunaratna heads the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He told The Times that the SBY government "needs not only to address the operational aspects of counterterror, which it has done effectively, but deal with the ideological foundations, and funding, recruitment, propaganda."

The core of the problem could be a network of pesantren, or Islamic schools roughly equivalent to madrassahs in "AfPak," the Afghan-Pakistani theater. Indonesian investigators have linked the July 16 bombers to two Islamic schools that are well known to the Indonesian authorities but have neither been closed nor curtailed.

One is the Al Mukmin pesantren at Ngruki in Solo, Central Java, where the Marriott suicide bomber apparently attended.

Jl's former leader and founder, Abu Bakr Bashir, who served jail time after the 2002 Bali atrocity, called the latest bombings an attack on Islam, after predicting on Friday that Jl would be made a "scapegoat" for the attacks. "This bombing is a warning from Allah to Indonesia, which looks down on Allah's law," Bashir said in a written statement.

Al-Bashir formed his Ansharut Tauhid, "Real Teaching," after splitting from the Indonesian Mujahedin Council, and he continues to preach his jihadist teachings.

Mr. Gunaratna said, "The Indonesian government believes in freedom of speech, so it allows clerics and publishing houses to continue their activities. Without dealing with these underlying causes, Indonesia will not deal with terrorism effectively or decisively."

Simon Roughneen is a freelance journalist based in Southeast Asia.

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