

Indonesian Cleric's Arrest Disrupts Radicalization in Southeast Asia

Brian Padden | Jakarta 13 August 2010



Photo: AP

Islamic cleric Abu Bakar Bashir talks to journalists in Jakarta (file photo)

Radical Islamic cleric Abu Bakar Bashir was arrested August 9 after a months-long investigation into a terrorist group calling itself al-Qaida in Aceh. Analysts say his arrest was more significant than just the disruption of a terrorist plot. It demonstrated, they say, a new emphasis by Indonesian authorities on preventing radicalization and terrorist recruitment in Southeast Asia.

Radical Islamic cleric Abu Bakar Bashir was charged Wednesday with helping plan terrorist attacks in Indonesia. It is a crime that carries a maximum penalty of death. Police say he was involved in setting up a terrorist cell and militant training camp in Aceh Province that was plotting high-profile assassinations and attacks on foreigners in the capital.

Symbolic importance

But terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna with the Singapore-based Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies says Bashir's symbolic importance to the radical Islamic movement surpasses any operational role he may have played.

"Bashir remains a central figure in terrorism in Southeast Asia and globally," Gunaratna said. "He's

the public face. He's the iconic figure when it comes to terrorism in Southeast Asia. There is no one who is more prominent than Abu Bakar Bashir in Southeast Asia."

Who is he?

The 71-year-old cleric is a co-founder and spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, the al-Qaida linked terrorist network. Its purpose is to establish an Islamic caliphate extending over the Muslim areas of south-east Asia.

Jemaah Islamiyah is blamed for a series of bombings that killed over 250 people in the last decade, including those on Bali in 2002 and 2005.

Bashir spent more than two years in prison for his involvement in the 2002 terrorist bombings on Bali that killed 202 people. The Indonesian Supreme Court threw out his conviction in 2006.

Bashir has denied any involvement in terrorism but he continues to speak out and founded a legal organization called Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid or JAT that promotes the creation of an Islamic state in Indonesia. His arrest had been anticipated after several JAT members were arrested in May for allegedly funding terrorist activities in Aceh.

No mistakes

Security analyst Ken Conboy with Risk Management Advisory says police took its time collecting intelligence and evidence against Bashir so as not to repeat the mistakes they made the last time they arrested him.

"The government really blew the case against him," Conboy said. "They had him in prison. They couldn't make any of the bigger charges stick and even the charges they did eventually get, he was let free. So I think the government really stumbled the last time around and I am sure this time they were being very very methodical and making sure they had as tight a case as possible before they arrested him."

Bashir blames pressure from the United States and Australia for his arrest and some hardline Islamic organizations in Indonesia defend him as a victim of anti-Islamic forces.

Extensive influence

Gunaratna says Bashir's influence in radicalizing Muslims and recruiting terrorists extended throughout Southeast Asia. Malaysia recently arrested three suspected militants believed to have ties with the radical cleric.

And he says Bashir's arrest is a turning point for the region's war on terror. It shows that Indonesian authorities are now willing to go after ideological figures with significant public support that promote extremist causes.

"The president of Indonesia should be congratulated because previous presidents did not take the threat seriously," Gunaratna noted, "and certainly the government of Indonesia should send to prison not only those who are operational terrorists but ideological terrorists, people who write, who advocate and who support terrorism. And Abu Bakar Bashir belongs to all those categories."

But he says this new emphasis on cracking down on those propagating extremist messages is just beginning, and more must be done to prevent the radicalization of another generation of Muslims in Southeast Asia.

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