

Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Australia as Part of the Problem

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During the time that has elapsed since 11 September 2001, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has drawn significant political mileage from the well-worn cliché that the 'world changed' on that tragic day. This is, of course, nonsense. The world is always changing, the events in New York and Washington on that awful day simply made clear to people like Howard the dangerous directions in which this change had been occurring.

The forces that inspired the intense political frustrations, existential anger, and logistic prowess required by the September 11 hijackers to foment and then carry out their plot have been evident for many years, growing incrementally but discernibly to anyone prepared to listen to voices excluded from formal avenues of political authority. But it is a sad fact of contemporary international politics that too little attention is paid to these marginal voices.

This is especially so with successive Australian governments, where the patterns of European settlement and subsequent economic and strategic myopia has fostered deeply ingrained suspicions and ignorance of its non-European neighbours. Although it is true that Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia has increased substantially since the 1970s, at the government-to-government level contacts have been confined mainly to elites. Mainly out of a fear of antagonising authoritarian regimes like that of former Indonesian President Suharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, Australian governments and diplomats curtailed their relationships with individuals and groups outside the regional political establishments. With the benefit of hindsight, it is now clear that a wider set of relationships that included formal and informal opposition voices might have lessened the shock caused by the terrorist attacks in Bali that occurred barely twelve months after 9/11.

The combined effect of 9/11 and the Bali attacks, the latter killing more than 200 people, including 88 Australians, was the onset of a deep sense of panic within Australian society. This panic has been especially evident in Australian government circles, although it is difficult to judge with any precision the respective roles played by political opportunism and geo-cultural ignorance in sustaining this panic. In terms of the former, the conservative government of John Howard has preyed on the public confusion generated by the 9/11 and Bali attacks to demonise asylum seekers who arrive in Australia from Muslim countries, reassert the primacy of 'Western' and 'Christian' values in Australian society, commit Australian forces to the US-led invasion of Iraq in the name of protecting fellow countrymen from (non-existent) Weapons of Mass Destruction passed to terrorists by Saddam Hussein, and proclaim repeatedly Australia's sovereign right to use pre-emptive military force against its neighbours should they fail to address adequately any potential terrorist strikes against Australian interests in the region.

In terms of ignorance, there has been a tendency in Australian government, media and academic circles to conflate Islamic terrorist networks with legitimate opposition groups. For many in Australia the simple term 'Islamic' now conjures images of violent *jihad*. In terms of engaging with nascent civil society movements in the region, this innate suspicion of any group whose politics is grounded in Islam raises significant problems. This is because Islam has become a key organising principle in post-authoritarian Indonesia, in Malaysia, and among marginalised Muslim minorities in Southern Thailand

and the Southern Philippines. Closing off dialogue with many of these groups robs Australia of a voice in organisations whose relative moderation poses the most significant impediment to the extremist alternative peddled by groups like the al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, the group responsible for the Bali attacks and a wave of subsequent bombings.

Looked at from a global perspective, there is nothing terribly unique in this development. A revival of religiosity is a defining feature of politics in many parts of the world, not the least being the United States and even Australia itself where the federal election of October 2004 saw, for the first time, an avowedly Christian political party win a position in the Senate. There are many explanations for the global significance of this phenomenon, the most persuasive of which posit the revival of fundamentalist religiosity as a reaction to the cultural disorientation caused by the accelerating pace of social and cultural change synonymous with neo-liberal globalization. It would be unreasonable to expect Southeast Asia to have remained quarantined from a cultural dynamic that has washed over the US and Australia with similar intensity, albeit in a Christian context.

Yet this is exactly what seems to have panicked many Australian commentators who view the revival of Islamist politics in Southeast Asia with growing concern. Moreover, as stated above, in their panic many Australian policy makers and commentators are inclined to conflate Islamist activists with militants, and Islamist militants with terrorists. The significance of this distinction – between non-violent activists, belligerent militants, and deadly terrorists – should not be underestimated. A growing body of psychoanalytical research suggests the obvious – that no-one is born a terrorist – and the less obvious – that becoming a terrorist is the result of a process of radicalization that more often than not involves several distinct phases of increasing militancy and violence.

Hence, addressing the root causes of terrorism must at some point in the near future consider policies that interrupt this evolution; and one of the best ways to do this is to address the existential angst that drives individuals along the continuum that often begins with activism and ends with mass murder. Policies that engage with activist and even militant groups, that accept, when appropriate, the legitimacy of their grievances, and that are prepared to assume that the diplomatic opprobrium that might flow from standing up against oppression and the denial of human dignity will go a long way to securing this end.

Unfortunately, rather than focusing on root causes, Canberra's current approach to counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia is premised overwhelmingly on the use of hard power to identify, hunt down, and if necessary kill those who might lend support to the terrorist cause. Make no mistake; terrorist groups have established a foothold in Southeast Asia. That Southeast Asia is home to a number of indigenous terrorist groups, like *Jemaah Islamiyah*, as well as the predominantly Arab *al-Qaeda* cadres who operate independently of these parochial groups is also beyond doubt. Moreover, such individuals and groups are likely to remain a dangerous feature of the regional landscape for many years.

But looked at from a wider international perspective this hardly renders Southeast Asia unusual or deserving of the title "*al-Qaeda's* second front" – an epithet applied with increasing frequency by commentators with little understanding of the wider social, historical and political frameworks within which Islamist politics has emerged in different parts of the region. Moreover, North and East Africa, as well as Central and South Asia, also have a number of indigenous terrorist groups inspired by an extremist interpretation of Islam and connected in some way with *al-Qaeda*. Indeed, using the US State Department's 2004 *Patterns of Global Terrorism Report* as a measure, South and Central Asia contain many more of these groups than Southeast Asia.

Still, it cannot be denied that there currently exists in the region an attitudinal dynamic that is leading some Southeast Asian Muslims to look on the extremism embodied in groups such as *Jemaah Islamiyah* and *al-Qaeda* as a legitimate and acceptable political stance. To this end, Jason Burke's observation that the 'debased, violent, nihilistic, anti-rational millenarianism' of *al-Qaeda* has become the dominant discourse of resistance is especially true of some parts of Southeast Asia.

The Australian government, and its friends and allies in the region and across the world more generally, will continue to fail in their efforts to manage the terrorist threat until they focus on the complex interplay of root causes – economic, political and cultural – that are driving a small but growing number of young Southeast Asians into arms of groups like *Jemaah Islamiyah*.

Sadly, however, there is little evidence that the Australian government, like its major ally in Washington, is any closer to grasping the importance of catering to basic economic and cultural needs in the fight against terrorism. Canberra remains a vocal supporter of Washington's misadventure in Iraq – an episode which numerous studies have shown as a publicity boon for Islamist extremists across Southeast Asia. Moreover, as mentioned above, Canberra has matched its rhetorical and material support for US efforts in Iraq by developing its own language of pre-emptive violence. Canberra also remains one of the developed world's most niggardly aid donors – as a proportion of GDP, Australian aid languishes near the bottom of the OECD league table. And making matters worse, it is now using its aid program to provide counter-terrorism training to Southeast Asian police and military units, further diluting its already miserable disregard for the basic needs of Southeast Asia's millions of poor and disenfranchised. Until the Australian government learns fully the lessons of 9/11, like its major ally in the United States it will remain a part of problem, rather than the solution.

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