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COMMENTARY

The Stakes in Bali

By C. HOLLAND TAYLOR | October 3, 2005

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population and democracy. Last Saturday's attacks in Bali are intended to isolate the country from Western influence, and pave the way for further radical inroads in what was long considered the home of the most liberal and tolerant Islamic culture on earth.

The latest series of bombs to hit the Indonesian island of Bali targeted Westerners, Hindus and also moderate Muslim visitors to the island paradise. By launching this attack, the extremists sought to accomplish three goals simultaneously -- kill or maim as many foreign tourists as possible; devastate the economy of this Hindu "island of the gods;" and undermine the government of Indonesia itself, which is still controlled by moderate Muslims.

The Indonesian programs director for Libforall Foundation -- a Javanese Muslim named Sonia Sri Suryani -- was less than three miles away when one of the blasts shattered the popular tourist resort of Kuta. "Security in Bali was already tight before this latest bombing, with police and guards on constant lookout," she said by telephone. "But still the terrorists were able to slip through."

Describing the perpetrators, she said, "The fanatics think it's OK to butcher anyone who's not a 'true' Muslim like themselves. They're convinced everyone who believes differently is an infidel, whose blood is *halal*, or legitimate to spill."

Islamist radicals hate and fear the local variant of Islam that is predominant in Indonesia, because it offers a pluralistic and tolerant alternative to their extremist views.

Backed by Arab petrodollars, radicals are on the move throughout Indonesia -- forcibly shuttering scores of Christian churches; destroying homes, shops and mosques that belong to minority Muslim sects like the Ahmadiyah; seeking to ban "un-Islamic" art, music and films; and attempting to silence the voices of a liberal and progressive Islam that stand in the way of their complete dominance.

In the words of Ms. Suryani, the only way to prevent future carnage like we've just witnessed in Bali "is by creating a social environment in which Muslims are ashamed to endorse or perpetrate violence. A society in which such acts are viewed as un-Islamic."

Unfortunately, it's hard to stigmatize and eradicate such acts, when the Indonesian government stands by and allows radical groups to use less bloody, but no less criminal means to intimidate their opponents.

Still, progressive Indonesian Muslims and those of other religions have not buckled in the face of the militants' campaign of intimidation and violence. Inspired by leaders such as the nation's former president and long-time head of the largest Muslim organization in the world, Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, moderate Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Confucians have united to confront the spread of intolerance, and demand an effective government response.

To the rest of the world, Bali is little more than a tropical playground, which tourists can visit or abandon with minimal regret. But in fact, the stakes in Bali are much higher than that.

Half the world's shipping passes through Indonesian territorial waters, and the status of Indonesian Islam is a key barometer of extremist attempts to radicalize the world's entire Muslim population.

As Admiral Thomas Fargo, former commander of U.S. forces in Asia, has said, "Indonesia is a key battleground in the struggle against terrorism and radicalism."

The outcome of this struggle remains in doubt. The latest bloodshed in Bali is a stark reminder of that... and a warning lest we neglect this vital part of the Muslim world, and allow it to slip into the orbit of radical Islam.

Mr. Taylor is Chairman & CEO of Libforall Foundation (www.libforall.org), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to reduce religious extremism and discredit the use of terror -- by helping local champions of liberty and tolerance overcome radical Islamist ideology, and the terrorists' pretense to speak for all Muslims worldwide.