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Indonesia and Transnational Islamic Extremism

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Is the island nation's laid-back Islam being undermined from the [Middle East?](#)

An exhaustive report compiled by three reputable Indonesian foundations and led in part by a former Indonesian president, was released last week saying Indonesia's moderate form of Islam is being undermined by extremists who are infiltrating moderate Muslim groups and institutions in order to gain support for an Islamic state or international caliphate.



But the bigger question, however, is why the report is out now, and what there is to be alarmed about. Titled "The Illusion of an Islamic State: the Expansion of Transnational Islamist Movements to Indonesia" has just been published jointly by the Wahid Institute, the Maarif Institute and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity).

It might have to do with the fact that national elections are Thursday. In fact, whatever money has flowed in from the Middle East, and it could well be considerable as the exhaustively researched report indicates, support for the Islamic parties has actually been dropping. According to admittedly volatile and sometimes unreliable polls, support for the major parties has flagged. Support for the National Awakening Party has 10.5 to 3.25 percent (reflecting a party split); for the United Development Party from 8.15 to 4.15 percent, and for the Prosperous Justice Party. Votes cast for religious parties in 2004 totaled 32.5% compared to 14 percent in the February polls although numbers have come up in the last few days.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's secular Democrat Party estimated to take as much as 25 percent of the vote, followed by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, or PDI-P headed by former President Megawati Sukarnoputri forecast to come in second. However, according to most opinion polls, the PKS may become the leader among the Islamic-inspired parties in the Indonesian general election and thus the cause for concern.

However, critics say the apprehension over the Indonesian Islamic parties should have been discussed between them and the mass Muslim organizations first, rather than being hung out to dry during a general election campaign. International influences, which undoubtedly exist, should not be exaggerated at election times for domestic political effect.

Indonesians remain largely tolerant of other religions and a common aphorism is that "one hijab [headscarf] in your heart is worth on your head." But that doesn't mean there isn't cause for worry, and the report is exhaustively researched. The Wahid Institute is led by Abdurrahman Wahid, previously President of Indonesia and past leader of the National Awakening Party (PKB), closely linked to the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) the largest Muslim mass organization in Indonesia. Past leaders of the NU and the Muhammadiyah, which claim 70 million members between them, have both contributed to this report, which represents the work of 30 researchers from Islamic universities covering 17 provinces in the country.

It alleges that members of one of the leading Islamic parties, the Prosperous Justice Party (the PKS) are engaged in infiltration, as well as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). The accusations against HTI are in line with comments on it globally, that it is an extremist organization sheltering within a legal framework of activities. In Europe it attracts Western radicals using anti-capitalist arguments and neo-Marxist language. HTI is therefore not a mainstream Islamist fundamentalist group, although it claims to support sharia law and the creation of a caliphate through peaceful means.

HTI, the report says, appears to be a hybrid between neo-Marxist and political Islamic traditions and very Westernized compared to fundamentalist groups. Its ideology appears to be fundamentally inconsistent. The two traditions generally exist in mutual contradiction.

The accusations against the more mainstream Prosperous Justice Party, part of the current ruling coalition, are more serious, needing assessment in a wider domestic and international context. PKS's use of publicity including pictures of supporters without hijabs may have offended some traditional supporters, but the party is attracting wider secular reformist support.

The PKS is probably a more modern, professional and committed political structure than traditional Muslim or Islamic parties. It is likely to be the leading representative of modern political Islam in Indonesia after the April 9 general election and to join a winning coalition for the July Presidential elections. It has campaigned on Palestine and against the Gaza war, but has also put on its own web site articles on innovative options for Middle East peace including the twin state solution, confederation between Palestine and Israel and a wider Middle Eastern economic union including Israel, based on the 2002 Arab regional offer.

PKS's preparedness to encourage wider dialogue on these issues is consistent with its modernity and internationalism. Its commitment to secular reformism, to address economic and social issues and to take on civic responsibilities may also inspire parties like Hamas to go down the same road.

Both parties may have been inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, which has also inspired a parliamentary opposition in Egypt. Internationally the new wave of political Islam cannot simply be boxed into an extremist corner, and does represent a significant political force in the Arab and Muslim world which will have to be moderated and accommodated.

The PKS cannot to be put on the same level as Hizbut Tahrir. It should be judged on what its leadership says and does, rather than allegations about some of its members, which might be sometimes applicable to other Islamic parties and institutions.

It might have been instructive to read all of this rather earlier than a week before the national elections. However valid the report's conclusions, delivering when they did raises the question whether the concerns of the wider society are being served, or those of the political parties that would prefer to see the Islamists, however accommodating, out of the picture. The international press, whose attention span is frighteningly short, should hang around for April 10.

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