

Indonesia steps up pressure on Islamist militants

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PAMULANG, INDONESIA -- Shortly before noon March 9, a bearded man in a white T-shirt and black pants walked into the Multiplus business center in this grimy town south of the Indonesian capital. He booked two hours on the Internet, recalled the center's manager, Rinda Riana, and settled into booth No. 9 to surf the Web.

Five minutes later, Riana's customer was dead, shot by members of Detachment 88, an anti-terrorism police unit set up with U.S. funds and training. His bullet-riddled body lay sprawled under a sign pitching low-cost Internet access: "Surf With Value."

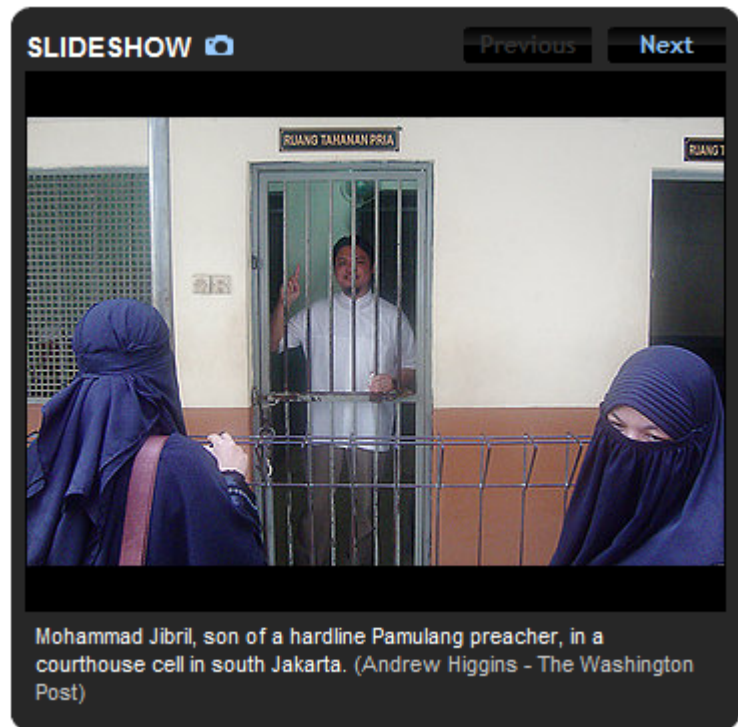
The operation ended a long hunt for a very high-value quarry: Joko Pitono, an al-Qaeda-trained bombmaker better known as Dulmatin. The United States considered Dulmatin, an architect of the 2002 Bali bombings and other outrages, such a menace that it had put a \$10 million bounty on his head.

Over the past six months, Indonesian security forces have killed or arrested a host of key figures in an Islamist network that once looked as if it might tip the world's most populous Muslim nation into chaos. Unlike [Pakistan](#), where extremists have steadily expanded their reach, Indonesia has hammered its main militant outfit, Jemaah Islamiyah, and the organization's even more violent splinter groups.

Whether Indonesia secures long-term calm depends on its capacity to combat extremism with more than guns and prison cells.

"Radical movements cannot be dealt with by only force," said Ansyaad Mbai, Indonesia's counterterrorism chief. More important, he said, is uprooting an ideology of Islamist militancy that turns believers into bombers.

Held in check for decades by authoritarian rule, Islamic radicals took full advantage of the freedoms offered by democracy's arrival in 1998. Authorities, struggling to hold the country together amid economic meltdown and political chaos, paid little attention to what they initially viewed as a minor menace.



That began to change after the 2002 Bali bombing, which appalled the public and prodded the government to acknowledge it had a problem. Further attacks, including a [second Bali bombing in 2005](#), added to a mood of crisis and rallied moderate clerics to confront a small but expanding and increasingly dangerous minority.

Which side prevails will be decided in local battles such as the one unfolding here in Pamulang at the al-Munawwarah Mosque, just down the road from the Multiplus business center where Dulmatin, the Bali bomber, was cornered and killed.

The mosque, in a leafy housing estate, has been controlled since 2004 by Muhammad Iqbal, a Saudi-educated cleric and veteran of anti-Soviet jihad in [Afghanistan](#). Iqbal, also known as Abu Jibril, [figures on the U.S. Treasury Department's list](#) of "specially designated nationals," a catalogue of terrorism suspects, drug traffickers and others the United States regards as dangerous.

"Trouble started as soon as he got here," said Abdurrahman Assegaff, a rival Pamulang cleric who is leading a campaign to oust Iqbal and purge his mosque of jihadi thinking.

On the defensive

When Iqbal arrived in Pamulang, hard-line ideas like those he promoted looked as if they might eclipse Indonesia's traditionally laid-back take on Islam. The potential consequences appeared grave, not only for Indonesia but also for Washington, which was alarmed by the direction being taken by a country with more Muslims than the Arab heartland in the Middle East. At the time, Indonesia's best-selling magazine was an Islamic weekly called Sibili, which offered a mix of wild anti-American conspiracy theories and cheerleading for jihad.

Today the tide seems to have turned. Above the entrance to the housing estate served by Iqbal's mosque, a big banner exhorts, "Beware of Terrorists Among Us." Opponents of the cleric put it up late last year after his oldest son, Muhammad Jibril, a publisher of radical tracts and an incendiary blogger, was arrested in connection with suicide bombings last July at two Jakarta hotels. Jibril is on trial in Jakarta, along with a Saudi national he allegedly worked with to help finance the attacks. They have denied the charges.

Sibili, meanwhile, has toned down its anti-Western rhetoric. "We now see bigger potential for sales among moderate Muslims," said Lufti Tamimi, the magazine's director and part-owner. In January, Tamimi ditched Sibili's hard-line editor and commissioned a series of articles denouncing Salafism, a purist strain of Islam that underpins extremist ideology.

Indonesia still has plenty of Web sites, books and magazines that champion jihad. The plight of Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere still ignites fury; so does, in some circles, the "martyrdom" of Dulmatin and others killed by Detachment 88. (Police said the Bali bombmaker was shot after drawing a pistol.) And Pamulang's controversial preacher shows few signs of going soft.

But Iqbal is on the defensive. In an interview recently after noon prayers, he denied supporting terrorism but voiced admiration for Osama bin Laden because "he fights against those who attack Islam." He also boasted of how, while in Pakistan, he got to know radical Islamists, including Hambali, the alleged al-Qaeda-linked mastermind of the Bali bombings, now in the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, [Cuba](#), and Abdullah Azzam, bin Laden's late mentor.

The bombings in Bali and Jakarta, Iqbal said, were not terrorism but "acts of anti-terrorism" designed to halt U.S. violence against Muslims. "There is no terrorism or terrorists," he added. "The only things in Islam are jihad and mujaheddin."

Flanked by two of the mosque's trustees -- a retired Indonesian diplomat and a former oil executive who used to work with Obama's Indonesian stepfather -- Iqbal mocked moderate Islam as a travesty. "True faith is hard-line," he said. "In this mosque, we teach jihad. That is what makes this mosque special."

Suspicious stirred

The feud between Iqbal and his foes, at first a largely local quarrel, gained national attention, and new intensity, after Dulmatin's killing in March. The realization that the bombmaker, who was thought to be hiding far away in the Philippines, had been living down the road from Iqbal's mosque at the housing estate in Pamulang stirred suspicions that he was linked to the cleric.

Dandan Aurdjaja, an opponent of Iqbal's who supervises security guards at the estate, said he was shocked when he saw on TV a photo of Dulmatin issued by police after his death. "I realized that I had seen him at the mosque," Aurdjaja said. Along with scores of other residents, he has signed a petition demanding Iqbal's removal as the mosque's main preacher.

Iqbal, sitting cross-legged on the mosque floor, denied having had contact with Dulmatin and said the bombmaker never worshiped at al-Munawwarah. A senior police official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity said investigators are looking into a possible link but have not found any evidence tying Iqbal directly to Dulmatin.

Indonesia has wrestled on and off with militant Islam since the 1950s, when a group called Darul Islam launched a violent campaign to press its demands for an Islamic state. Authorities struck back ferociously, executing many Islamic militants.

"Today's terrorists are the progeny of the people we executed," said Mbai, the counterterrorism chief. Many Indonesian radicals fled into exile, including Iqbal, who moved in the 1980s to Malaysia, where he was later jailed for three years for promoting radicalism. He also spent time in Pakistan and Afghanistan, forging close links with other believers in the primacy of jihad.

Iqbal's arrival in Pamulang in 2004 injected suspicion and tension into a harmonious mixed community of Muslims and Christians. He ordered Muslim women to stop taking motorbike taxis, told his congregants to stay away from Christmas parties hosted by their Christian neighbors and peppered his sermons with calls for jihad against kafirs, or infidels.

"He preached constantly against kafirs," said Soetopo Wonobojo, a retired businessman who serves as a neighborhood chief in the housing estate served by Iqbal's mosque. Like many other residents, Wonobojo started praying elsewhere. A mysterious explosion in the yard of Iqbal's house in 2005 raised suspicions of bombmaking. Police searched his home but found nothing.

As al-Munawwarah became a magnet for hard-line worshipers for many miles around, Assegaff, the rival cleric, stepped up his efforts to oust Iqbal. Last August, he led scores of followers to lay siege to Iqbal's mosque. After a tense showdown, they retreated. In a separate incident, Assegaff's wife punched one of Iqbal's followers.

Iqbal and his supporters hit back. A Web site run by Iqbal's now-jailed son vilified Assegaff as an American lackey in the pay of the CIA, which is unlikely since he is best known in Indonesia as the organizer of large protests against a 2006 visit to Jakarta by President George W. Bush. "I hate America, but I most hate Muslims who kill other innocent Muslims," Assegaff said.

For Mbai, Indonesia's top counterterrorism official, the clash over al-Munawwarah Mosque offers both encouragement and a reminder of the tenacity of Islamic radicals.

"The good news is that community leaders are willing to oppose radical ideas," he said. "The bad news is that radical groups are very active in propagating their message."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/12/AR2010051205187.html>