Transnational Islamic Extremism—Myth Or Reality

Region

Friday April 03 2009 22:43:08 PM BDT

By Terry Lacey, Indonesia

A report compiled by three reputable Indonesian foundations says that the moderate form of Islam in Indonesia 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 (Jakarta Post 03.04.09). The Report, entitled “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).

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.

The Report is published during the run-up to a general election on April 9th and 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 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 (PKS), part of the current ruling coalition, are more serious, needing assessment in a wider domestic and international context.

PKS use of publicity including pictures of supporters without hijabs may have offended some traditional supporters, but the party is attracting wider secular reformist support.

Many Indonesian Muslims believe that one hijab in your heart is worth ten on your head, and routinely do not wear one. There has been a reaction against basing perceptions of loyalty to Muslim ideas or strong belief in Islam simply on formal public ritual or dress in a country with large scale corruption and a wide range of modern social behavior problems.

The PKS is probably a more modern, professional and committed political structure than more 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 preparedness to encourage wider dialogue on these issues is consistent with its modernity and internationalism.

PKS 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.

The PKS 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.

Perhaps the dirty political washing of the Indonesian Islamic parties, which may well affect all of them, should have been discussed nicely 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.

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