

The Indonesian way

By Shada Islam | May 7, 2011

AS the world focuses on the death and ideology of Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda's terrorist network, it is worth remembering a time when Islam — especially in Pakistan — did not mean intolerance, extremism and violence.

It was not that long ago that Pakistan was still a 'normal' country, an important global and regional player, with ambitions of achieving rapid economic development.

Yes, Pakistani political leaders have always had very visible shortcomings, but in those days some still managed to impress — at least sometimes. The country was repeatedly subjected to successive military coups, years of army and civilian misrule and blundering recipes for economic success.

The overall picture, however, was upbeat. Pakistan and terrorism were not mentioned in the same breath. The country was not suspected of deliberately harbouring terrorists next to elite army schools, the security services did not play with the fires of religious extremism and mosques were not attacked. Women's rights were protected. Minorities lived in peace.

There was still some light at the end of the tunnel — a prevailing sentiment that if Pakistan played its cards right, made better friends, put its house in order, it could still emerge from darkness and despair.

Pakistan's descent into darkness has been chronicled by those much better placed to comment on just why things have gone so wrong. But my memories of Pakistan were recently stirred by Ahmed Mustofa Bisri, a leading Indonesian Islamic scholar, whose message of moderate Islam holds strong echoes of the religion I grew up with as a child in Pakistan. As Muslims seek relief from the hate-mongering tirades of Al Qaeda and other terrorists, I found it reassuring and uplifting to listen to Mr Bisri's version of a tolerant, caring and spiritual Islam.

As head of the Nahdatul Ulama, a leading Indonesian Islamic organisation, Mr Bisri argues that Wahabism, exported and spread by oil-rich Middle Eastern countries, must be countered by those who oppose hatred and violence. "Islam believes in respect for humanity and life ... hatred and killing are not in the Quran," he said at a meeting in Brussels. "Most people's information about Islam comes from Wahabism," he said. "But Wahabis have their own agenda and use Islam as a political tool."

Muslims should have the courage to speak out against extremists' narrow and ritualistic view of their religion, he said, adding: "We must come back to our inherent nature as human being, ennobled by God."

Working with the LibForAll Foundation an NGO dedicated to fighting extremism, Mr Bisri, was in Brussels to launch the English version of a book called *The Illusion of an Islamic State*.

C. Holland Taylor, who heads LibForAll, said Indonesia was proof that an alliance of moderate Muslim leaders can effectively isolate and discredit the ideology of religious hatred, supremacy and violence that underlies and animates terrorism. Taylor, who worked with Indonesia's late President Abdurrahman Wahid — also known as Gus Dur — said the work was the result of years of research and had already proved effective in Indonesia's combat against extremism.

As Gus Dur envisaged it, the project is about stemming the tide of radical Islam and mobilising traditional Muslim leadership to consciously oppose the spread of militant Islam. The aim is also to expose Wahabi/Salafi proselytism activities which are regarded as a crucial factor in the spread of Islamist extremism. Mr Bisri and Mr Taylor have their work cut out for them — both at home and abroad. Although Indonesian society is tolerant and liberal — as well as pious — terrorism remains a threat.

In its latest report, entitled Indonesian Jihadism: Small Groups, Big Plans, the International Crisis Group outlines how homegrown terrorism in Indonesia has lately taken on a new form, with small cells operating independently from larger, more established terror groups.

The report notes that following the twin bombings of the Ritz Carlton and Marriott Hotels in Jakarta in July 2009, which were attributed to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a string of subsequent attacks were the work of small cells that share a radical Islamist ideology, but which have no clear operational links. The latest attacks include several assassinations of police officers, attempted bombings of churches and police posts in Java, and a series of letter-bombs sent to various people in Jakarta. Most recently, a suicide bomber attacked a mosque in Cirebon, West Java, on April 15, while an attempt to bomb a church in Tangerang, on the outskirts of Jakarta, on April 24 was foiled.

These terrorist cells have emerged despite the clear success of Indonesia's counter-terrorism operations. The ICG advises that Indonesia's newly created National Anti-Terrorism Agency should emphasise community outreach, tracking ideological evolution among militant groups, countering extremist messages and improving the monitoring of militants, both in prison and after their release, as its priorities.

Listening to Mr Bisri and reading some chapters of the book, I was convinced, however, that Indonesia's Muslim scholars have the courage and determination not only to denounce such violence but also to counter it with religious arguments. If true Muslims are to win this battle of ideologies against extremists, they will have to do more to spread their message and work harder to develop counter arguments.

Indonesian scholars deserve credit and support and more publicity for embarking on the difficult task. Perhaps one day, Pakistan's religious scholars will also work as fervently to reclaim Islam from those peddling a distorted version of religion.

The writer is Dawn's correspondent in Brussels.

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