

Indonesia: Disintegration of the Last Great Colonial Power?

A Special Overview Report

By Kerry B. Collison

As Indonesia's 210-millions struggle to understand what the past four-year's radical changes might mean for them, destabilizing political and sectarian machinations threaten the fragile democracy of this multi-faceted society.

The collapse of the Suharto Administration did not, as many had envisaged, bring prosperity and peace. Instead, the country's social and economic order deteriorated even further, exacerbated by the uncertainty which accompanied President Habibie's short tenure at the nation's helm, and his inexplicable decision which resulted in East Timor's exit from the Republic.

Indonesia has undergone an extraordinary transition during the last four years. Ruled by a military-backed authoritarian leader for three decades, the leadership vacuum which followed Suharto's fall from grace remains to taunt those who manipulate to fill his impossible shoes.

With the election of the partly blind cleric Abdurrahman Wahid as President, and Madame Megawati at his side, many believed that Indonesia had passed its most crucial test, and would survive. The newly elected government had been installed through an open, albeit flawed democratic process, and in the wake of the recent Asian financial crisis it was generally agreed that the country could then move forward, and that the new leadership would resolve social tensions and ethnic conflict which had flared in many of the outlying provinces. But, this was not to be; the brutal legacy left by a generation of the Suharto-led, Javanese controlled Indonesian Armed Forces occupation of the resource rich outer areas provided fertile ground for the rapid growth of separatism. As President Abdurrahman Wahid assumed power in Jakarta, in the wake of the humiliating East Timor referendum, ethnic and sectarian tensions erupted throughout the archipelago, leaving tens of thousands dead and hundreds of churches and mosques destroyed.

Whilst sectarian and ethnic tensions continue, abetted by political opportunists and disgruntled TNI officers, Indonesia moves precariously closer to becoming fragmented, the possibility of civil war dangerously real.

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Ironically, the genesis of this disintegration process commenced with the birth of the nation and the Declaration of Independence by Mohammad Hatta and President Sukarno on August 17, 1945, when some 14,000 islands were bound together to become the Republic of Indonesia. It was then that the people of Java commenced their migration from their overcrowded island to displace the Dutch as the nation's new colonists in the rich, predominantly Christian and non-Muslim provinces. Within two decades mosques could be found in most towns and villages from Sabang to Merauke, the groundswell of anti-Javanese sentiment becoming more apparent as Muslim immigrants were allocated land, often displacing the indigenous tenants.

Following Suharto's bloody coup and ascent to power in 1966, Indonesia leaped from being an economic backwater and political pariah to become one of the West's most favored

investment destinations. By the mid-Seventies Indonesia's demographics had changed immensely and a middle class appeared, the nation in awe of its President and his offspring of emerging gatherers as the First Family's increasing power and wealth stunned even the most casual observers. Discoveries of resource rich oil, gas and mineral deposits in the relatively under-populated outlying provinces encouraged Jakarta to increase the numbers of Javanese *transmigrants*.

In West Irian, or Papua as it is now known, mosques appeared, and houses and schools were built to accommodate the transmigrants displacing minority groups who were rarely compensated for their loss. Forests were destroyed, natural habitat ruined, and cultures infected by the waves of eager Islamic laborers which poured into Borneo's hinterland with uncontrolled slash and burn tactics that impacted severely on the environment. Ultimately, the indigenous people in all of these provinces were driven from their traditional lands, their cultures ignored as the new landlords, the Javanese, consolidated their positions, effectively a *de facto* extension of Jakarta's powerful military elite.

The Separatist States

East Timor

East Timor was not part of the original Indonesia. The Indonesian Government claimed the territory after the revolution in Portugal in 1974, when its African colonies gained independence. On November 28, 1975, East Timor was declared an independent "democratic republic". Indonesia invaded the territory on December 7, 1975, undoubtedly supported by Australia and the US. Subsequent to its abandonment of the former colony, Portugal played the "spoiler" by arming and equipping the resistance movement, *FALANTIL*, then supporting the pro-independence, anti-Jakarta line by backing activists worldwide.

It is unclear why Habibie's government agreed in early 1999 to hold a referendum to decide East Timor's future, observers believing that Jakarta, either misjudged the level of local discontent with Indonesian rule, or considered that 24 years of oppressive and often brutal occupation of the former colony would guarantee a positive result. Condemned for the military action unleashed in East Timor after the vote and desperate for international assistance to help its crisis-ridden economy, Indonesia reluctantly withdrew from the territory, the TNI stung by the criticisms leveled and the enormous loss of credibility. Immediately, there were fears within Indonesia that East Timor would act as a catalyst for other provinces to declare independence, Australia bearing the brunt of Jakarta's rhetoric for initiating the outcome in East Timor.

As for Portugal – immediately following the independence ballot, the former colonial masters viewed the political change as an opportunity and dispatched a warship carrying a consignment of Portuguese currency in what was a blatant attempt to restore some semblance of colonial influence in the Far East.

Today, a substantial number of East Timorese remain in camps in West Timor. More than 250,000 had been deported there or fled during the post referendum violence when pro-Jakarta militias went on the rampage, leaving 1,500 dead. The toll reflecting two decades of Indonesian colonization resulted in the deaths of approximately one third of the nation's population, which had been reduced over those years by a quarter of a million who died either in combat, as a result of torture, or malnutrition in their mountain hideaways.

East Timor is now an independent nation with Xanana Gusmao at the helm. Observers believe that there is every likelihood that this embryonic nation's security will be challenged not only by the absence of any real economy, but from within as traditional ethnic rivalries between the main tribal groups resurface.

Aceh

Situated on the northern tip of Sumatra, Aceh, often dubbed the "Veranda of Mecca" was once an independent nation until being conquered by the Dutch. Resistance continued throughout the Dutch colonial rule and when Indonesia became a unitary state in 1950, demands for separation from Indonesia resulted in armed resistance (supported by the US CIA) through until 1976 when Hasan di Tiro, a descendant of the old sultans returned from exile in the US and declared Aceh an independent state. Three years later di Tiro fled into exile in Sweden leaving his National Liberation Front (GAM) to continue its guerrilla campaign against the Javanese presence.

During the 1980s as many as 3,000 of the GAM soldiers were trained in Libya. The separatists are funded by wealthy Acehnese businessmen in Malaysia and Thailand who have assisted with the flow of modern weapons to the rebels. A recent power struggle between di Tiro and Zulfahri, considered by many to be a moderate, ended with Zulfahri's assassination in Kuala Lumpur just hours before an accord signed in Geneva on May 12, 2000 came into force.

Aceh is important to Indonesia. Should it break away, Indonesia would suffer a severe psychological blow and the loss of rich reserves of oil and gas. Although Jakarta has promised a greater share in the wealth, this offer has failed to placate di Tiro and his supporters. It is more than likely that the Acehnese will continue to fight for independence as Jakarta moves to meet this challenge with considerable force as it has over the past years. Acehnese claim that 30,000 of their people have already lost their lives in the struggle.

Oil operators have experienced a number of attacks against installations, the incidence of grenade attacks, shootings and armed assaults against Indonesian police increasing dramatically throughout the province since May 2002 when Jakarta mobilized an additional 40,000 troops and police and located the majority of these forces in the Aceh area.

West Papua

The province of Papua is about three times the size of Java but has only 2.5-million people. Half of these are indigenous Papuans of Melanesian stock and composed of about 240 different peoples, each with their own language, the remainder from other Indonesian islands who migrated to the area through the *transmigrasi* programs. The new arrivals dominate the province's commercial sector and enjoy the support of the army and police. Over the past year most towns have seen outbreaks of violence as Papuans have become increasingly aggressive in their demands for independence.

When the Dutch agreed to transfer sovereignty to Sukarno's Indonesian Government in 1949, it was agreed that western New Guinea's future would be negotiated the following year. These undertakings never materialized. On December 1, 1961, a number of Papuan leaders declared independence while the territory was still under Dutch rule. Commanded by General Suharto, a special Indonesian military force, the *Mandala Command* was raised in January 1962 to "liberate" the territory. Fighting erupted and the crisis was resolved only when an interim UN administration took over in August, which resulted in the territory

being turned over to Indonesian sovereignty the following year. In 1969, Indonesia's annexation was ratified in an exercise called "the Act of Free Choice": a "referendum" which involved 1,000 handpicked, well-influenced or intimidated Papuans.

In 1969 the Organization for Papua's Independence (OPM) was formed to continue the struggle against Indonesian rule. Jakarta's familiar tactics were evident throughout the province; suspected activists disappeared, the Indonesian army brutal in its enforcement of Jakarta's rule. The OPM raids often resulted in accusations that the separatists were openly supported by neighboring New Guinea, a claim denied by Port Moresby. However, there is clear evidence that OPM camps have been located across the border in New Guinea. In 1973 western New Guinea was renamed "Irian Jaya" (Greater Irian). In a conciliatory gesture, Wahid approved a further name change to Papua in January of this year.

The province is rich in resources, boasting one of the largest copper and gold mines in the world generating an estimated US\$2-billion annually. Timber stands continue to supply the demanding building programs in Java and Sumatra, ownership of which remains primarily under the control of the military and Jakarta's élite. Indonesia will hold onto Papua (and Aceh) with all available means. There is evidence that the Special Forces (*Kopassus*) were involved in the recent attack on American schoolteachers employed by the Freeport mine, leaving two foreigners dead and eleven wounded. Historically, *Kopassus* has a reputation for implementing such destabilizing tactics in separatist areas.

The Spice Islands

There are approximately 1,000 islands of the group which lie between Papua, Timor and Sulawesi and occupy three quarters of a million square kilometers, of which only 10 percent is land. Before the arrival of the Europeans, most of the Spice Islands were ruled by local *rajas*, many of whom embraced Islam. The Portuguese introduced Catholicism. When the Spice Islands fell to the Dutch in 1830, and the Royal Netherlands Indies Army was founded, it consisted almost entirely of Ambonese and other Moluccans.

Months after the Dutch recognized Indonesian independence, local leaders proclaimed the independent South Moluccan Republic, comprising Ambon, Seram, Buru and over 100 smaller islands. Armed conflict between the Moluccan forces and the Javanese was inevitable, and when the Dutch de-mobbed its local forces, in order to diffuse further conflict, 35,000 former Moluccan soldiers and their families were evacuated to the Netherlands, believing that the transfer was temporary. Descendants of this group remain in the Netherlands today, fiercely loyal to any independence movement that might remove the Javanese from the islands. Although the balance remained delicate, ethnic and sectarian harmony did prevail until a Muslim governor was appointed in 1992. Muslims replaced all-important positions in local government that had been traditionally filled with Christians. Bloody fighting then erupted throughout the Moluccas leaving more than 5,000 dead.

In January of 2000 Indonesian security forces mounted an operation to sweep for illegal weapons as armed, disgraced pro-Indonesian militias arrived from Timor. Over the following two years, the Spice Islands slipped into virtual civil war as Java-trained Islam militants, calling for a *jihad* (holy war) have killing Christians and burning churches.

Until his arrest in 2002, the *Jihad* Paramilitary group was led by Dja'far Umar Thalid, a Javanese Islamic preacher who fought in Afghanistan in the late 1980s who maintains ties with Pakistan and Yemen, had covert support from a number of Indonesia's disgraced generals and Amien Rais. When the Islamist military body was first formed, substantiated

reports of meetings with Suharto's son-in-law, former general, Prabowo fueled speculation of their involvement with the *Jihad* guerilla training bases outside Jakarta, where soldiers were trained before being shipped to Ambon where today they waged their destructive holy war against the Christian population.

The arrival of this force which, in September 2002 numbered twelve thousand coincided with an orchestrated pullback by the Army and Navy, contradicting orders from President Wahid to blockade their arrival. The *Laskar Jihad*, as they are known, is well financed and originates from Java and Sumatra. It should be noted that post September 11, in early 2002, the Laskar Jihad forces in Ambon maintained a 'welcome desk' at the local airport specifically for the purpose of greeting Taliban soliders upon their arrival. A charter flight from Kuala Lumpur carried 140 Taliban soliders into Ambon to support the Laskar Jihad in their killing spree across the islands. The Laskar Jihad leader was arrested in Java in 2002 however Thalid's forces continued with their slaughter for most of the first half of 2002. Interestingly, Indonesia's Vice President, Hamzah Haz visited Thalid in the days following his arrest in Java.

In the day prior to the Bali/Kuta bombings the *Laskar Jihad* closed down its Internet website and, two days after the deadly attack announced that they were disbanding, stating that 'their mission in east Indonesian' had been achieved. The Laskar Jihad has left some ten thousand dead in the Ambon/Maluku islands, an achievement which could not have been realized without the firm support of the TNI which was provided through Jakarta's Special Forces, *Kopassus*.

As a result of the ongoing violence there has been an upsurge in support amongst Christians both in the Spice Islands and in The Netherlands for an independent, Christian Ambon. It is most unlikely that this dream will be achieved unless there is a total fracture of Indonesia as a republic.

Riau

Oil and gas rich Riau has also threatened Jakarta with calls for independence. In 1999, local citizens gathered near Pekanbaru to demand that the Government honor a promise to deliver 10 percent of all oil revenues back to the province failing which, the Riau people threatened that they would fight. Caltex operates Asia's largest oil field in Riau. Coupled with the adjacent field (also under Caltex control) these two production areas represent 15 percent of Indonesia's revenues. A fairer share of oil profits would undoubtedly quell demands for independence and calm local militants.

Kalimantan (Borneo)

In 2001 Kalimantan witnessed some of Indonesia's most vicious ethnic killings in recent times. Christian Dayaks and indigenous animists joined local Malay Muslims to end the flow of *transmigrants* from the island of Madura. The ensuing clashes were not separatist in nature, but established that regionalist sentiments needed to be heeded by Jakarta if the unitary state is to be maintained. Four Thousand men, women and children were slaughtered in one attack against a Madura transmigrants village in Central Kalimantan. At this time, Balikpapan in the east, Palangkaraya in the south and Pontianak in the west remain destabilized primarily due to ethnic rivalries.

Sulawesi (Celebes)

Throughout the last three years sectarian violence has also flared in Sulawesi, home to a number of ethnic and religious groups and *transmigrants*. Calls for independence have become more apparent in this province which, in 1958 was supported by CIA airdrops when a number of dissident officers attempted to secede from the Sukarno-led Republic. The Indonesian Army eventually crushed that rebellion. Resentment towards the central government remains, the possibility of an independent state less likely than that of Aceh or Papua. Areas surrounding Poso have been placed under curfew as religious tensions mount, aggravated by the presence of *Laskar Jihad* paramilitaries.

Bali

The tragedy of 12th October 2002 has resulted in the decimation of the island's tourist industry. Considered by security experts as a soft target, intelligence warning of a potential attack were ignored by both Jakarta and Canberra resulting in the deaths of some 200, the majority being Australian tourists.

Experts are predicting from a prolonged recovery process subject to, of course, there being no further attacks on the island.

Historically, Indonesia earned substantial foreign exchange from Bali's tourism however less than 5% of the revenue generated into Jakarta coffers made its way back to the predominantly Hindu province and it is this inequity which must be addressed by the central government if the Republic.

The Future

Today, Indonesia is a nation in extreme crisis. The Chinese community has fled *en masse*, taking their expertise and business acumen and following their capital to safer havens. Foreign investment is under threat. There is a lack of coherence in policymaking within the Government; and the prospect of autonomous provincial leaders being given greater authority over natural resources fuel fears of even greater corruption, in what is perceived to be an already overly difficult environment. Tourism has all but collapsed due to the instability. Indonesia's government debt has increased to US\$150 billion as of the first quarter of 2002, compared with a pre-crisis level of US\$53-billion. The current debt level is equivalent to the country's GDP.

In a nation which once prided itself as a safe destination there are frequent bombings, grenade attacks, riots, demonstrations, expatriate murders and, of course, the widespread sectarian violence which now threatens to derail all attempts to reach an acceptable compromise with separatist leaders in strife-torn Aceh, Ambon and the other Spice Islands, Papua, Sulawesi and parts of (Kalimantan) Borneo.

The Bali bombings have now exposed Indonesia's incapable leadership to harsh criticism both domestically and internationally for its failure to dismantle the *Jemaah Islamiyah* and *Laskar Jihad* terrorist organizations, resulting in the October attacks.

Although 90 percent of Indonesians follow Islam, most have long prided themselves for their religious tolerance. However, elements of fundamentalist extremists have been permitted to take control, polarizing the Indonesian society.

Whilst the nation waits for leadership to act, vested interest groups continue to destabilize the Megawati Administration, the possibility of another coup a constant threat to regional stability. Amien Rais, secretly bitter that his own Moslem political party with its 27-million followers fared so poorly in the elections, has been more than an outspoken critic of Megawati, calling for the President to resign just days prior to the Bali bombings.

In August 2002 the Indonesian parliament passed two historic pieces of legislation. The first, permitting the people to directly elect the President and Vice President in 2004. The second, to abolish all seats in the parliament currently held by the military.

Javanese elites and the generals who had enjoyed power and privilege under the Suharto regime will, undoubtedly, continue with their destabilizing processes, instigating conflict in an attempt to steer the nation's 210 million back under the TNI's control. Indonesia's powerful military has substantial wealth throughout the economy and the commanders will not permit their power base to be further eroded. It is almost a certainty that, leading up to the 2004 elections there will be wide spread civil unrest as the Moslem dominated voters demonstrate in support of their parties, a situation which could easily play into the hands of the country's military.

Should the country slip back into the chaotic times of May 1999, the Indonesian military would move swiftly to re-establish order, effectively circumventing the two powerful Moslem parties from gaining total control, most likely implementing yet another transitional military government until order was restored. As President Megawati continues to work towards consolidating civilian supremacy over the military, by reforming the military's organizational structure to prevent it being used as a political instrument by future governments, many believe that Indonesia's future remains inextricably tied to the TNI.

Although, on the surface the Indonesian military appears indifferent, there is mounting evidence that elements of the TNI have, by omission or commission, been deeply involved in the religious conflict in the Spice Islands. Members of the President's Cabinet have been most vociferous in their claims soldiers had done little to stop renewed waves of killing between Christians and Muslims. Disillusioned with the outcome in East Timor the TNI rank and file is today, identifiably split into a number of camps, the once unified armed forces for the first time under threat of being emasculated by the emerging Moslem front. The opportunity for the people to directly elect the new leadership promises dangerous times ahead.

Deeply divided, the military has lost its powerful control over politics and the economy, the command structure barely operational in the field. But, a successful coup would undoubtedly reverse the *status quo*, the possibility of such action still of concern as senior ranking officers watch the nation move closer to disintegration.

The challenge is for Indonesia's leadership to determine a constitutional framework that does not compromise the delicate balance between Jakarta and the resource rich provinces. The granting of autonomy may not now be enough to stem the growing tide of separatist sentiment and religious intolerance. Stubbornly clinging to the concept of a unitary state when federalism may be the solution reflects the underlying fear many leading Javanese intellectuals hold for their future. Sharing half the population of 210 million, any move to shift the flow of subsidies away from the overpopulated center would, undoubtedly, result in

more than 25- to 30-million Javanese suddenly falling victim to such drastic economic change, precipitating a massive exodus to Eastern Indonesia and even Australia.

After 35 years of censorship the majority of Indonesians are not cognizant of the facts relevant to East Timor's annexation. In consequence, many provincial separatist hopefuls incorrectly assume that East Timor's belated, but successful conclusion ensures international support for their own causes. With the exception of Aceh and Papua which both have special cases, other Indonesian provinces such as Riau, Sulawesi and the Spice Islands would be naïve to expect international intervention to support their calls for anything greater than autonomy. Aceh's independence had previously been guaranteed by international treaty and has, therefore, a case for the restoration of its sovereignty. Papua, on the other hand has a much greater position in international law because of the implementation of the 1969 Act of Free Choice which was obviously so flawed.

There is no quick fix solution to the archipelago's demise. The Indonesian leadership needs to galvanize its resources and restore harmony between ethnic and religious communities in regions which have been torn apart by communal conflict during recent years, dismantle all terrorist paramilitary movements, reform the current, corrupt legal system, overhaul the banking system and restore a suitable investment climate to encourage the return of both foreign and domestic investment.

And the military must remain in the barracks.

Even if these steps are taken in the immediate future, it will still be some years before the new and revitalized Indonesia will be able to attain the high economic growth levels seen before the Asian financial crisis which precipitated the country's current socio-political woes. And, in order to achieve this objective, Indonesia needs to adhere to a path of constitutional reform to steer the country from the dangers of other authoritarians who wait, impatiently, for the cracks in newly emerged, democratic movement's support base to appear.

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THE BALI -JAMSOTEK HOSPITAL

PREAMBLE

In view of the inadequate hospital facilities currently available in BALI, an observation which became apparent as a result of the tragic loss of Australian and other nationalities as a result of the Kuta terrorist attack on 12th October 2002, the Jamsostek (Workers' Social Security) Fund has indicated a serious desire for Australia to design, build and manage a hospital in BALI.

Jamsostek has also indicated that it is prepared to contribute 25% of the funds required to build such a facility, one which would incorporate a nurse training school.

Jamsostek has requested that the Australian entity also maintain management control over the facility, that Australian doctors be recruited to raise the level of medical expertise in Bali, and that there be a continuous program of transfer of skills to local doctors and nurses.

It is envisaged that the Bali province would provide the necessary land, at no cost. An initial business plan is available, and the suggested budget for this project is as follows:

AS45,000,000 for the building and hospital equipment. This equipment should include ambulances, standby emergency generators and any other equipment deemed necessary by management.

AS5,000,000 to cover training, nurses & doctors quarters onsite, start up capital.

TOTAL A\$50 million

The author developed and managed a number of major projects in Indonesia over the years, and would be willing to produce a preliminary business plan should the Australian government support this project which would provide an international standard hospital facility to accommodate our citizens in Bali, and one which would nurture existing relationships between the Balinese and Australians.

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The BALI Bombings

That one of the world's most treasured tourist destinations came under terrorist attack on Saturday 12th October 2002 is now historical fact. Half of the 180 victims who perished were Australians, the single most devastating attack on Aussie civilians since the Japanese bombed Darwin during the Second World War.

As investigators from five countries cooperate in examining the Kuta Beach scene, the international community continues to speculate as to the motivation and the identities of those responsible for this tragic event. Many from international intelligence services immediately laid the blame on al-Qaeda without first examining other, and less obvious terrorist groups. To understand who these are and their domestic Indonesian agenda, we must revisit the times of the repressive, Suharto regime.

Abu Bakar Bashie & Jemaah Islamiyah

In 1971, Abu Bakar Bashie an Indonesian citizen of Yemeni descent co-founded a puritanical Islamic boarding school near Solo in Central Java. That school still exists today. Suharto had Abu Bakar jailed from 1978 to 1982 for attempting to form an Islamic militia called *Komando Jihad*. Within months of his release from prison he was again convicted of subversive activities and, consequently, fled to Malaysia where he quietly went about gathering other Indonesians, Malays, Filipinos and Singaporeans who shared his vision for a Pan-Islamic state which would incorporate Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. This was, in effect, the birth of the Jemaah Islamiyah, or Islamic Community group.

Riduan Isamuddin (a.k.a. Hambali)

Riduan is a 36-year-old Indonesian cleric, the adopted son of Abu Bakar and believed to be the al-Qaeda's mastermind in S.E. Asia. Riduan uses the *nom de guerre*, 'Hambali' and is the most likely candidate responsible for the Bali bombings. During his adopted father's exile in Malaysia, Hambali joined the Jemaah Islamiyah followers there and, by 1998, had accompanied some of the 20 Malaysians in al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. Subsequently, for security reasons the group split into two cells and commenced identifying likely targets. It was at this time that President Suharto stepped down in Jakarta, and Hambali returned to organize local Indonesian groups which terrorized the capital in the months following Habibie's ascension to the Presidency. That Christmas, more than 20 bombs were exploded almost simultaneously in nine Indonesian cities killing 18 during church services. Suspects interrogated named Hambali as the mastermind who returned to Malaysia where he participated in the production of a 'presentational' video to convince the al-Qaeda to fund an operation to acquire 17 tons of ammonium nitrate with which they planned to attack US and other Western assets throughout S.E. Asia. It should be noted that this video was found in late 2001

in the rubble of a house in Kabul used by Mohamed Atef, bin Laden's military commander. During post September 11 sweeps through Singapore, the authorities arrested more than a dozen of Jemaah Islamiyah followers who, when interrogated, admitted to their association with the al-Qaeda, that the ammonium nitrate was to be used to build 7 truck bombs to destroy Western locations. Hambali was identified as the recipient of al-Qaeda funds, channeled to him through a Saudi Arabian charity. Hambali used part of these monies to recruit a Malaysian who ran a clinical pathology company to purchase four tons of ammonium nitrate – and this cache has never been found giving rise to speculation that some part of this stock was used in the Bali attacks.

The LASKAR JIHAD & Jafar Umar Thalib

Jafar Umar Thalib, a veteran of the Afghan-Soviet war has close links to former President Suharto's family, friends and cronies. He is known to have met with Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 1987 and founded the fundamentalist Moslem Laskar Jihad (Allah's Holy Warriors) in 1998. The Laskar Jihad grew into a 12,000 strong, paramilitary force across the archipelago whose followers flooded eastern Indonesian provinces killing an estimated ten thousand Christians in the Maluku (Ambon) areas. Hambali's (Jemaah Islamiyah) forces, participated in the combined three year operation, obviously supported by the TNI's Special Forces, Kopassus who had the capacity to prevent the ongoing slaughter of unarmed Christians but ignored the atrocities, under instructions from Jakarta. And why?

Since Suharto stepped down in 1998, Jakarta's elite and powerful TNI leadership, who had enjoyed substantial material benefits during the dictator's reign, suddenly found themselves facing the prospect of being marginalized as a result of the burgeoning democratic processes as Habibie, then Wahid, lost control of the country's economy and commenced sidelining senior TNI officers. Within months of the creation of the Laskar Jihad, there was a steady stream of powerful visitors to Jafar Umar's door including, General Prabowo and Amien Rais. Jafar Umar preached his own brand of fundamentalist Islam, imbued with Indonesian nationalism, opposed to any break-up of the Republic making it a natural ally of the TNI. That the sectarian violence continued unabated, observed by the Special Forces, is a clear indictment of the TNI's role in supporting the sectarian violence as an end to maintain instability throughout the nation, with the purpose of encouraging the people to support a return to military rule.

On 9th May 2002, the day following the Laskar Jihad's leader's arrest for inciting a massacre of Christian villagers in the Maluku Islands Indonesia's VP Hamzah Haz visited the detained Thalib, further demonstrating just how shaky Megawati's leadership had become. In August the Indonesian Parliament passed two very important pieces of legislation, the first preventing the TNI from holding seats in future parliaments and the second, and perhaps more significant, providing for the election of future presidents and vice presidents by direct vote from the people.

Although the Bali bombings are perceived to be the work of al-Qaeda, we would be well advised to consider the TNI's own agenda and the benefit of such destabilization. When one

examines the coordination required to have bombs located at three separate targets all detonated within the same time frame, one more than a thousand kilometers to the north aimed at another Christian body, the Filipino Consulate in Menado then the attacks are, in the writer's opinion, more likely to have been the handiwork of Laskar Jihad elements supported by Kopassus. The finger points directly at this fundamentalist terrorist organization for the carnage created in eastern Christian provinces from 1998 until last week, and for the fact that just hours before the bombings they closed down their Internet website and announced that they were disbanding as 'their work was now done in the eastern provinces'. The blast killed mainly foreigners with a lesser number of local, Hindu Balinese, the collateral damage to Moslems relatively insignificant.

Today, with Bali's image severely shattered Indonesia has slipped even further towards economic and political chaos, with the military waiting eagerly for 2004 - and the presidential elections, an event which will undoubtedly see a return of the bloody riots which have unfortunately become a familiar hallmark of the country's flirtatious engagement with democracy.

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The work is submitted by me, as an individual. My contact number is (03) 95609920