



Submission No 55

Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Indonesia

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**Submission to the
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade
Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Indonesia**

**by
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The Purpose of this Submission

On 22 August 2002 the Minister for Foreign Affairs asked the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade to review Australia's relations with Indonesia. With hindsight, there is no doubt as to the timeliness of this initiative.

The following submission relates specifically to the 12 October 2002 attacks in Bali. This event has lent a special significance to the present inquiry due to the important foreign policy and security issues that have come under renewed scrutiny in its aftermath.

This brief submission is to advocate a policy of facilitating long-term rather than short-term stability, by lending consistent and open support to democratic reform in Indonesia.

The Bali Tragedy

On Saturday, 12 October 2002 a terrorist attack was launched at the beachside town of Kuta on the island of Bali. Two bombs exploded in quick succession in Paddy's Bar and outside the Sari Club. The detonations and subsequent fires left more than 190 people dead and several hundred injured, many of them young holiday-makers from Australia and other Western countries.

Media reports, citing US and Australian government sources, quickly pointed the finger of blame at the international terrorist network Al-Qaeda and its local operatives. Little attention was given to the national let alone local socio-political context in which the attack had taken place. It was not sufficiently noted that attacks of a similar kind, if not scope, have occurred with increasing frequency since the collapse of Suharto's military dictatorship in 1998. As a consequence, the tragedy of October 12 was co-opted prematurely and uncritically into the global political agenda and rhetoric of the United States government's "War on Terror." The danger therein is threefold.

If we consider Al-Qaeda in isolation, as a single organization with a global agenda and a centralized authority structure rather than the network of several loosely affiliated national or local extremist groups it really is, we may fail to understand how Al-Qaeda is able to maintain a power base in numerous parts of the world. Al-Qaeda should not be construed as an irrational and hence inexplicable phenomenon, born of a fanatical hatred toward the West among some groups in the Islamic world. What needs to be explored are the reasons for its successful expansion into countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, where the vast majority of Muslims have been consistently classified as moderates by generations of Western scholars.

A further danger is to mistake what in fact may be a bottom-up process of internationalization among militant Islamic groups across the globe for a top-down Al-Qaeda expansion. While a unitary organization's expansion conceivably can be halted by pursuing a smallish group of key culprits through intelligence or military operations, a bottom-up process may well be able to self-perpetuate endlessly until underlying political

and socio-economic causes are removed. The implications for foreign policy are serious and far-reaching.

Finally, there is the more immediate danger of simply failing to bring the sponsors and back-stage organizers of this heinous crime against humanity to justice. Unless the Bali terror attack is contemplated against the shadow-play screen of contemporary Indonesian politics and its local dynamics, this remains a distinct and sad possibility.

This is not to deny that an internationalization of terrorism has been taking place for some time. Radical Islamic groups in Indonesia have had international links for at least two decades. An August 2002 report by the International Crisis Group notes that the now-infamous leader of the Council of Indonesian Mujahideen, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, and many of his closest associates had established such links in the course of their participation in the armed struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, a struggle during which the US supported some of the Wahhabist groups from which Al-Qaeda emerged. (The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 was also a watershed in that it provided the first model case for an Islamic state.) Notwithstanding these international linkages between some individual Indonesians and Afghanistan war veterans in other countries, the primary focus of political ambitions for most Islamic organizations in Indonesia has been on a national level. In recent decades, most of these organizations were in opposition to the Suharto regime, whose repressive stance toward political Islam had begun with the initial crackdown on Darul Islam in 1977, and had reached a further peak with the Tanjung Priok massacre of 1984. More recently, according to the ICG and other reports, there have been dubious alliances between elements in the military and militant Islamic groups. This connection may date back to the final years of the Suharto period.

In short, whatever explanation one may favor, a network of Islamic radical groups with international links is present in Indonesia today, and some elements in some of these groups at least are willing to use terrorism as a political tool -- with or without help from their affiliates and donors abroad. The political ambitions of these people most likely are still focused firmly on national objectives, even though their discourse may reflect an international rhetoric of militancy in the name Islam that is aimed primarily at the US and its allies.

The problem in allocating blame for the Bali blast is that radical Islamic groups like Jemaah Islamiyah are not the only groups in Indonesia today who may be willing and capable of committing or supporting acts of terrorism, such as the recent attacks in Bali. There are many causes and perpetrators of violence in contemporary Indonesia. Inter-religious conflicts, vigilante killings of petty criminals and other undesirables, institutionalised protection and extortion rackets and the alarming spread of paramilitary groups are all part of this phenomenon. Different groups even within the government's own security forces have been fighting turf wars, with clashes between police and army forces reported from Java, Sumatra and Flores in recent months. A string of violent incidents bears testimony to increasing lawlessness and an expanding culture of political and economic violence, cutting across all sectors of society. This diffusion makes it

difficult to pinpoint a single person or group as the likely perpetrators in any particular case.

In Bali itself, there has been tension between Hindu Balinese and Muslim labor migrants from Java and elsewhere. Many fear this process could marginalize the Balinese as an ethnic and religious minority on their own island, as has been the fate of other peoples in the outer islands. The more immediate problem is economic competition.

As early as April 1999 there have been violent attacks on Javanese street sellers. In recent years, the Balinese have also responded to a number of security issues in relation to organized crime involving outsiders. In turn, the Java-based militant group Laskar Jihad had begun to build a presence in Bali, allegedly to protect the Muslim minority. Days after the Bali blast, this group disbanded or went underground. Laskar Jihad, in any case, has rarely acted on its own. In Aceh, Ambon and West Papua, for example, the group appears to have enjoyed good relations with the army according to several sources.

The main losers in the attack on Bali, apart from the victims themselves and their families, are the island's residents, irrespective of whether or not they are ethnically Balinese. The Hindu Balinese majority seem to have realized this and, until now, have shown restraint by not lashing out at Muslim immigrants in their midst.

Already destabilized by the attack, President Megawati has been under enormous pressure from the US to take stern measures against terrorism. Can she do this without the military, or with it, given that it is widely suspected in Indonesia that the military could have been implicated in this or other bomb attacks? Could wanton arrests trigger a Muslim backlash? We may have to be patient. Too much pressure now could help to derail Indonesia's emergent democracy.

The US and Australia, considering their interests in Indonesia now, should be aware of this peril. We should not in any way encourage a possible return to the 1960s by lending support to the notorious military elite force, Kopassus, for the sake of short-term stability, as some have suggested. Instead we may want to move forward by consistently supporting the reform of the military, law reform, and other measures which may encourage the current democratization process in Indonesia.