

# Vigilante jihad : Inside Indonesia's Islamic Defenders Front

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JAKARTA, Indonesia — It is forever dark in the core of Jembatan Besi, one of Jakarta's most crowded slums. Even at high noon, only a narrow band of sunlight glows above a five-story canyon formed by closely built cement dwellings.

To slip into the narrowest walkways — crevices, really — locals must twist their bodies and shimmy sideways. Fluorescent lamps, slung from extension cords, light their path.

Still, according to the neighborhood holy man, it used to be worse. The crowding and poverty was once compounded by wickedness.

After the three-decade reign of strongman Gen. Suharto came to an end 12 years ago, society went wild with freedom, said Tubagus Muhammed Siddiq, 53, a white-robed Islamic scholar and Jembatan Besi native.

Throughout the island of Java, he said, prostitution, gambling and boozing crept from the shadows and into the streets. Inept police did nothing, he said.

"My neighborhood was one of the worst. Three straight blocks of gambling and drinking," Siddiq said. "We had no choice. We were forced to jihad."

With other fundamentalists around the city, Siddiq co-founded a vigilante network called the "Islamic Defenders Front." Their legions of young, Muslim males torched brothels, ordered drinkers off the corners and beat back resisters with wooden rods.

Today, the Islamic Defenders Front is much more than a glorified neighborhood watch. They have positioned themselves as Indonesia's moral police — a self-proclaimed, 15-million strong "pressure group" — sworn to rid Indonesia of sin.

"Society is diseased. Diseased with a social infection that violates Shariah," Siddiq said in reference to Islamic law.

Indonesia is the world's most-populous Muslim-majority nation, considered a leading light of moderate Islam by U.S. President Barack Obama, who spent four years in Jakarta as a child. Under its young democracy, the country has enjoyed more modernity, more transparency and a rising middle class.

But that same newfound freedom has tested its religious pluralism, which many Indonesians say is their country's greatest strength.

Freedom has allowed a hardline minority to seize the soapbox and harness the fury of Muslims distressed by rapid modernization. Their rank-and-file are young, low-income Muslim males compelled by the romance of jihad. The tolerant brand of Indonesian Islam extolled by the West is, in their eyes, simply more tolerant of evil.

Their targets? Nightclubs. Churches. Liberal Muslims. Embassies of foreign nations considered hostile to Islam.

In the last six months alone, the Islamic Defenders Front has successfully rallied to imprison the editor of Indonesia's very tame version of Playboy Magazine, stabbed a Christian pastor nearly to death and raided Asia's largest gay film festival in Jakarta.

The well-publicized mob attacks, led by hooded men shouting Arabic battle cries and glaring through ragged eyeholes, have become routine in Jakarta.

"We fear for Indonesia's future," Siddiq said.

But so do many ordinary Indonesian Muslims, who fear the Front will hijack Indonesia's reputation for moderate Islam — while police and politicians stand idly by.

## **Dark Justice**

The Indonesian archipelago first absorbed Islam around the 12th century from Arab traders. Today, however, the Middle East's religious rigidity feels worlds removed from Indonesia's more flexible incarnation of Islam, which in much of the country is infused with Hindu, Buddhist and Animist traditions.

Though the nation's top Islamic body, the Ulema Council, forbids smoking in public, more than one-third of Indonesians consume cigarettes — many of them like mad. Despite a fatwa against Facebook flirting, Indonesians indulge in the social network more than any other country outside of the United States.

Mall rats match their hijabs to their sneakers. In much of the country, booze is sold openly. And while propriety keeps Jakarta's nightlife from spilling into the street Bangkok-style, the capital's partying is equally decadent behind closed doors.

Most tolerate modern frills and vice as the price of a free society. The Front sees a creeping cancer.

Their argument echoes the 1980s "Moral Majority" movement, backed by U.S. pastors seeking Bible-inspired laws for a majority Christian nation. Likewise, the Front demands Islamic piety and Quranic law for Indonesia, where more than 85 percent of the country's 240 million citizens identify as Muslim.

The vigilantes are best known for their so-called "sweeps." Karaoke dives and pubs, particularly those operating during the holy month of Ramadan, are told to shut down.

Those that refuse face a screaming mob clad in white robes. They rush out of trucks by the hundreds, screaming Allah's name, rods clenched in raised fists. Their sheer numbers often overwhelm security guards or hired heavies defending nightclubs.

“The first time I saw this, I was at their headquarters at around 9 p.m. Dozens were returning from sweeping the city with blood all over their jubas [white robes],” said Jajang Jahroni, an Islamic scholar and author of “Defending the Majesty of Islam,” an academic examination of the group.

“They said, ‘We’ve just done jihad ! Our cuts and wounds will be witness to our struggle in the hereafter !’” Jahroni said. “After evening prayers, they’d keep sweeping the city until dawn. It was a sort of dark justice.”

At the dawn of the 21st century, there was much vice to sweep.

Indonesia was redefining itself after the 1998 fall of Suharto, who suppressed both communism and organized Islam as threats during his three-decade iron rule. Street clerics were forced to register with the government. Muslims were jailed on flimsy charges of agitating for an Islamic caliphate.

When the economy tailspinned in the late 1990s, Suharto’s grip loosened. Repressed grudges and desires were satisfied violently in the streets. The poor rioted against the rich, namely well-off ethnic Chinese. More than 1,200 were killed and an estimated 160-plus women were raped.

Vice also flourished, particularly in poor communities. “We were like inmates freed from prison,” said Muhammed Holil, 35, a social worker in the Jembatan Besi slums. “The police did almost nothing.”

To the Front’s founder, a cleric named Habib Muhammed Rizieq, Suharto was the wicked Egyptian Pharaoh in the Quran. With Suharto gone, however, Rizieq, Siddiq and other fundamentalists were free to organize a resistance. The same sense of lawlessness that allowed so much vice also gave hardline Muslims the freedom to fight for the kind of Indonesia they thought was right.

Every booze stall, drug pusher and prostitute was warned first and offered spiritual counsel, Siddiq said.

“Not once, not twice. Three times. If that failed, we used the final resort,” he said.

Jihad.

“I stress that jihad does not have to be violent,” Siddiq said. “When all those discos were being destroyed, I was trying to negotiate with the owners. But if they hired thugs to initiate fights, we had to defend ourselves.”

Through vice raids, the Front won infamy and sympathizers. “If it weren’t for the Islamic Defenders Front,” Holil said, “this neighborhood would be far worse off.”

Their moral policing appealed to Muslims — particularly young men — who feel then and now that Indonesia’s immature democracy is incapable of repairing society.

“Sometimes [the Front] does wrong,” said Irwan Maulana, a 28-year-old University of Indonesia student. “But sometimes they bring justice. When the government’s doing such a bad job, who’s going to fix these problems ?”

## **Expanding its influence**

In recent years, the Front has expanded its crusade beyond nightlife haunts. The billiard bars and karaoke brothels they’ve wrecked are too numerous to count. Now, so are their cultural, religious

and political targets.

Core founder Rizieq once vowed to “hunt down” American and British foreigners in retaliation for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. In 2006, the Front stormed offices of Playboy Indonesia (which doesn’t publish nudity) and followed up with renewed threats this year to hunt down the publisher. (He is now serving a two-year sentence under indecency charges.)

They continue to burn down churches in Muslim-majority neighborhoods. Two different porn actresses, American Tera Patrick and Japan’s Maria Ozawa, were both threatened for filming horror flicks in Indonesia.

In September, they disrupted Asia’s largest gay film festival, Q !, which has been held in Jakarta nine years running. And perhaps their best-known attack went down in 2008 at Indonesia’s National Monument. The Front descended on a group that, while celebrating Indonesia’s religious plurality, condoned one of their most-hated targets : a Muslim sect called Ahmadiyah that believes Muhammed might not be the final prophet. Dozens were left badly wounded from an onslaught with wooden sticks, including some of the country’s most high-profile pluralist leaders.

That is only the abridged list of the Front’s prey. Outside of an 18-month jail sentence for Rizieq and another key leader, both stemming from the National Monument attack, the Front has received little punishment.

“This is why most people have become more critical of them,” Jahroni said. “They’re troublemakers.”

The criticism appears to have peaked after police failed to prevent a reverend’s near-fatal stabbing in September.

Just nine weeks before Obama’s November speech in Indonesia, a country he described as a success story because faiths flourish in harmony, the Front besieged a Batak Protestant Church in an industrial suburb of Jakarta.

Their slight to Islam ? Praying in a grassy meadow owned by parishioners. The 1,500-large congregation had failed after years of negotiating with authorities to secure a chapel-building permit. So they began worshipping in an empty field, making soggy pews from newspapers unfolded on the grass.

The first mob appeared in June. “All of them wore white robes and skull caps. Some had masks,” said Luspida Simanjuntak, 40, the church’s female reverend. “They handed us a notice saying the community refused to allow this.”

Each Sunday, the mob’s numbers grew. “Only about 250 of us were brave enough to come,” she said. “There were more of them than us, at least 500. We couldn’t sit down to worship. We had to stand at the ready in case they attacked.”

Despite heavy police presence, the Front surrounded parishioners, dispatched masked men to linger in the bushes and led chants of “Kill the pastor !”

On Sept. 12, one protester tried to do just that. With a crew on eight different motorbikes, he sped toward a group of parishioners and jammed a knife into the abdomen of co-pastor Hasian Lumbantoruan Sihombing.

Churchgoers scrambled to escape on their own motorbikes. They pressed a jacket to the reverend’s wounds, but it quickly soaked through with blood. As they fled to the hospital, attackers swung back

to club Simanjuntak with a wooden plank.

“Once in the front of my head,” she said, “four times in the back.” Graphic images of the wounded pastors, bandaged and swollen in their hospital beds, were broadcast in Indonesia and beyond.

The assault was almost universally condemned, including by Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, as well as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono himself. At least 10 suspects have been detained.

“But do the police really care ?” Simanjuntak asked. “Why did they let this happen ?”

## Impunity

With public opinion so squarely against the Front’s street violence, many Indonesians have marveled at authorities’ refusal to disband or at least prevent their attacks, often announced in advance and drummed up via Facebook.

“The guardians of our society have chosen their side,” said Eva Kusuma Sundari, a parliamentarian with Indonesia’s Democratic Party of Struggle. “It’s with the perpetrators. Not the victims.”

Sundari’s party has tried to expose the deep ties between the Front and Indonesia’s military and police. The connection, however, is hardly a secret.

Guests to Siddiq’s spartan home are offered hot tea, dates and a guided tour of photos nailed to his lime green visiting-room wall. “That’s me and the old police chief,” he said, gesturing to a faded photo of a man wearing heavy regalia. Other photos reveal higher connections, to a former Jakarta governor here and an ex-vice president there.

These long-standing ties were established soon after Suharto’s fall by military generals who were eager to scrub away their reputation for oppressing Muslims.

Certain military leaders allied themselves with upstart clerics who founded the Front, according to Jahroni. Cash and free training followed, he said, and paramilitary exercises began in Bogor, a former Dutch colonial hub in West Java.

“They’re structured like a military organization,” he said. “These sweeps are very clean, very efficient, and wouldn’t be possible without a commander.”

Top police and army generals are fixtures at the Front’s anniversary celebrations. As recently as August, their 12th anniversary party attracted Jakarta’s governor. Even politicians who dislike the Front won’t publicly oppose them, Sundari said, for fear of dredging up the Suharto-era specter of Muslim discrimination. In the current climate, many politicians are loath to appear anti-Islam to an overwhelmingly Muslim electorate.

“If I’m organizing colleagues to oppose human rights problems in Myanmar [Burma], they say, ‘Oh, sure. I’ll join,’” Sundari said. “It’s shocking that they refuse when I try the same thing against a group that violates our own ideology.”

The Front, she said, is hell-bent on replacing Indonesia’s pliable Islam with a more rigid approach. Via text message threats, Front members have threatened to strip her naked in public for opposing an anti-pornography bill, she said. Its passage, heavily pushed by the Front and its allies, cleared the way for the recent arrest of Playboy Indonesia’s editor.

Lawmakers that opportunistically befriend the group, she said, will greet them on parliament steps in Arabic, a language some Indonesian children learn in Islamic boarding schools.

"I'm like, hey, wait ! I can't understand you ! Why all this Arabic dress, Arabic symbols everywhere ?" Sundari said. "We've developed our own Islam. Now it's contaminated by practices from Arabic culture. We embrace all religions, all differences, no problem."

"I, myself, am Muslim. My grandmother is a Hajj [one who has fulfilled a pilgrimage to Mecca]. My mother is a Hajj. But when I asked to marry my husband, who's Catholic, they said if he's a good man then the answer is yes," Sundari said. "That's open-minded. That's Indonesia."

Detractors liken the Front to a mafia in religious garb, a hired mob that will ignore targets for the right bribe. "They're extortionists," said Dede Oetomo, 57, Indonesia's best-known gay rights activist. "Thugs."

"I've actually received death threats for daring to organize LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender] conferences," Oetomo said. He now avoids announcing seminars too far in advance so the Front won't have time to organize attacks.

"It's annoying to have to worry about them all the time. Some of the younger activists say we should provoke them to attack us, just to expose them. I don't know if that's a good idea," Oetomo said.

"As much as Indonesia has always had a moderate reputation," he said, "this extreme type of Islam has always been lurking on the sidelines."

### **Spiraling out of control**

The urban labyrinth around Siddiq's home is brimming with humanity. Girls in lilac hijabs lean out of windows to gossip into their mobile phones. An elderly man pokes at a pile of lit garbage, dive-bombed by horseflies the size of marbles. A child steadies himself on the rim of an open sewage canal, scratches his head and urinates into the muck.

In these run-down quarters, where cement rooms rent for \$25 a month, Siddiq seems to know everyone. The chain-smoking district chief, the jolly vendors, the newborns greeted with pecks on the cheek.

This is his masterpiece. Free of public evil or vice.

There are signs, however, that the morality brigade he helped found has ballooned out of control.

The group's moral compass and core founder, Rizieq, is ill and said to be losing his influence. Several provincial chapters were told to go dormant for unknown reasons, but they brazenly continue raids without blessings from headquarters. A recent expose by The Jakarta Post suggests the Front has become nothing more than a "brand" adopted by opportunistic thugs.

Even Siddiq, whose walls abound with the Front's paraphernalia, has recently distanced himself from the group. "It's an internal matter," he said. "I can't discuss it."

But no matter the Front's future, Siddiq is adamant that Indonesia still desperately needs a ballast against moral decline. Not to wound or oppress the wicked, he said, but to lead them into the light.

"They say just one drink kills 5,000 brain cells. Just imagine drinking lots of it !" he said, looking

visibly pained.

“If you do evil in your own home, that is your private matter with God. But if you do it in the open, before my eyes, that is a matter with me,” Siddiq said. “Because if we see it, we must eradicate it.”

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