

Java (Indonesia): Islamism yes, communism no!

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Islamism is taking hold in parts of Java that used to be bastions of the left.

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Few observers of Indonesia have commented on the irony that Densus 88, the special counter-terrorism unit of the Indonesian police force, has been hunting down 'radical Islamist' terrorists in many areas of Central Java that a half century ago were solid support bases of the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party). Clearly there is something odd about this. Moreover, the alleged terrorists are frequently depicted as offshoots of groups that can be genealogically traced to the old Darul Islam (Abode of Islam) movement that was militarily defeated in 1962, and which was a bitter enemy of the communists. However, the Darul Islam had only a negligible presence in the parts of Central Java where the authorities are now looking for terrorists.

I became especially aware of this irony during several forays since 2010 out of Solo into parts of the Central Javanese hinterland that were once communist or at least radical nationalist territory. I recalled that even twenty or so years ago, one did not see the number of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) that have now sprouted along the roads between towns, villages and hamlets in this region. I also remembered that when you visited this area, you rarely witnessed rural women conducting their daily public business in the garb known as jilbab, as many do today.

With the public signs of Islamic piety everywhere, surely this is not the region that used to be known as the home of the so-called abangan (nominal or mystical Muslim Javanese peasants), and the bastion of kejawen (Javanese folk religion)? What might have accounted for such physical transformations of the Javanese hinterland?

From communists to Islamists

Part of the answer came to me during a longish, unstructured interview that took place one afternoon in a village in Tawangmangu, Central Java, with a group of Islamic purists who call themselves the FKPD (Communication Forum of the Darul Family). Virtually all in attendance in the small house that served as organisational headquarters were men, mostly in their twenties or thirties. Some of them had studied in pesantren or madrasah, though interestingly, the vast majority had no formal religious education at all. Almost all came from families that practised kejawen, and some from those that were not religious in any particular way. They readily admitted that their parents, grandparents, close relatives or neighbours used to support the PKI.

The men claimed that there are currently FKKD groups across no less than fifteen villages in the subdistricts of Tawangmangu and Jatiyoso, both in the Central Javanese district of Karanganyar. There was even a neat diagram on a whiteboard at the front of the main room of the house that identified each village group and its leadership structure (each group had its own name; almost all the leaders were called 'abu' this or that – a term denoting 'father of' in Arabic naming convention).

Interestingly, the men I met still felt like outsiders in their own village. Though they recognise that their families and neighbours are more generally devout today than before, the zeal with which members of the FKKD practice their faith cause them to be somewhat ostracised from the wider community. Perhaps this is not too surprising – several of the men recounted occasions when they admonished their neighbours for carrying out rituals they believed to be un-Islamic, influenced by local tradition or superstition. No doubt such acts do not win them local popularity contests. They also clash frequently with their parents or grandparents who do not share their passion for religious purity. The zealousness of the men had also attracted, at times, the attention of the state security officials, who appear to suspect them of being involved in terrorist activity.

Pathways to militancy

So how did they get to be where they are? One man in his thirties, who took the lead in answering my questions, volunteered part of his life story. He had never experienced significant formal religious training, except at primary school level. As he grew up, he had to pursue education and work in more urbanised areas in Central Java, away from his home village in Jatiyoso. As a 17-year old in the city of Solo, he encountered people with set ideas about how Islam should be actually practised, free of the toxic bid'ah, or heretical innovations, of the kejawen folk. By his own account, his parents had no influence on his religious awakening – they have only recently 'become Muslim' themselves.

Though not originally from Tawangmangu, he came to reside there. This is a well known tourism site; its high elevation being ideal for hilltop hotels, bungalows and villas frequented by local tourists from nearby cities seeking scenic views, fresh air and swimming pools. All the FKKD members showed their disdain for what goes on when the well-to-do come to Tawangmangu to relax (tales of drunkenness and the like), although a few had actually worked on the construction of some of the tourist accommodations they so dislike.

They claim that most of the villas are owned by wealthy Chinese and that the employees of the hotels come from outside Tawangmangu, leaving the children of locals to either work in factories around Solo or to venture overseas to live the harsh life of migrant workers. There was quite a bit of irritation evident when this situation was recounted to me. Given this sort of social awareness, it is not surprising that FKKD does not confine itself to prayer meetings – it has also been at the forefront of protests against corrupt local government officials.

A human rights activist and close associate of FKKD suggests that some of its members had fought in Ambon, Poso and other religious conflict hotspots. He also suggests the existence of close links with nearby pesantren run by Salafists – those who rather unbendingly cling to the idea of implementing a pure form of Islam as supposedly practised by the Prophet Muhammad's closest friends and relatives. Many analysts would jump at such connections and conclude that their links with other militants and their connections to conflict sites have defined the world view espoused by members of the FKKD, finding in such connections an alternative to the hedonistic lifestyles they see as being dominant in society as well as to the 'impure' religious practices of their neighbours.

Social and historical roots of militancy

But it is too easy to imagine that their rigidly purist Islam was adopted when fighting in Ambon and Poso, or simply swallowed whole from Salafi preachers who may or may not have studied in parts of the Middle East. Why would Salafi preaching resonate in the Javanese hinterland in the first place? We need to account for the social conditions that make it possible for individuals to be attracted to religious zeal and become ready to go fight in far-flung places. After all, we are talking about people who live in the land of *kejawen*, areas that were formerly bases of support for the PKI and radical Sukarnoism.

To explain this turn of events, I think we need to go back a few decades and turn our attention to the work done by the DDII (Indonesian Islamic Predication Council), an organisation that played a major role in attempts to 'convert' PKI supporters to Islam in the aftermath of the anti-communist massacres of the 1960s. The DDII was essentially the vehicle to which Mohammad Natsir, the former leader of the major Islamic modernist party, Masyumi, devoted himself after the military authorities prevented his return to politics in the early New Order. The DDII's activities in 'converting' residents of Central Java to a more pious outlook were quite successful: it clearly helped that the objects of their efforts had good reasons to become more religious in order to avoid being labelled communists, and therefore becoming subject to possible imprisonment without trial or summary execution.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, organised and supported by the DDII, religious teachers and preachers, mostly from outside of Central Java, were deployed to the towns and villages that were known to have been PKI strongholds. Natsir himself officiated at the opening of the Al-Mukmin pesantren in Ngruki that was co-founded by Abubakar Ba'syir and Abdullah Sungkar, who were in turn linked to the DDII.

Of course this school became infamous when an International Crisis Group report written after the first Bali bombing in 2002 identified it as a focal point of Islamic terrorist networks. Interestingly, long-time residents of Ngruki – located in Sukahordjo, on the outskirts of Solo city – recall how it used to be a culturally abangan and politically leftist-inclined community too. Another co-founder of Al-Mukmin, H.M Amir, recalled to me how prayer meetings he organised as a young cleric used to be attended by only three people. But the children of the original converts, he adamantly believes, take their religion far more seriously than did their parents.

It is possible that the activities of the DDII opened the way for others. For example, Darul Islam activists had by that time turned to proselytising and some would surely have migrated to urban and rural Central Java where this sort of work was being encouraged. In fact, it is widely believed that Ba'syir and the late Sungkar were both initiated into the Darul Islam in the mid-1970s by movement veteran – and alleged operative for the intelligence tsar Ali Moertopo – Haji Ismail Pranoto. If today's terrorists can be linked at all, in genealogical fashion, to the old Darul Islam, the New Order's anti-communist campaign should be seen to have made possible its implantation into the Central Javanese heartland.

But the New Order contributed in other ways as well: fertile ground for an array of Islamisms, including some violent ones, emerged once new social contradictions came to the fore as a result of the advance of capitalist development. The most fertile ground was in the ever-growing urban and peri-urban formations where the frustrated ambitions of the lower middle class met with the troubles of the swelling lumpenproletariat – and where these people had no viable leftist vehicles to turn to. It is well known for, example, that many activists of Islamic organisations hail from universities and come from families that had just migrated within a couple of generations to the

cities. The middle class status of some of these individuals may be somewhat precarious given high levels of youth unemployment and other social and economic problems.

From this point of view, it does make sense that relatively young FKPD members would have learnt their puritanical Islamic tendencies through life journeys that took them to the towns and cities for education and work, where Islam had become a major cultural resource to develop ideological opposition to the existing social order. Their current presence in the villages – the most remote of which are now fairly approachable from any Central Javanese city, thus allowing for constant cross-fertilisation of influences between the urban and the rural – has helped transform communities that were mainstays of Javanese folk beliefs and of left-wing political ideologies.

Limits of Islamism

Even so, as dramatic as some of the changes have been, one should not overstate them. In truth, FKPD and similarly rigid and puritanical groups remain isolated from most of society. That FKPD members frequently clash with their own neighbours and close relatives is a good illustration of this. They also do not see any political organisation – including those presenting themselves as ‘Islamic’ – as being true to the faith. It is hard to fault them for their view that Islamic party politicians today are mere opportunists, mired as they often are in money politics. Even the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) – the Islamic party that used to be able to present itself as an oasis of integrity – is damned by my interviewees at Tawangmangu as a ‘most corrupt party’.

What this means, however, is that their capacity to influence society-at-large remains restricted (though not negligible), and that the avenues through which they can influence formal politics directly continue to be almost non-existent.

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* Inside Indonesia 107: Jan-Mar 2012:

<http://www.insideindonesia.org/weekly-articles/islamism-yes-communism-no>

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