



IDSS COMMENTARIES (72/2006)

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Freed Bashir to formalise JI ? Could be his first major move after release

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31 July 2006

AT EXACTLY 7:30am on Wednesday, 14 June, Abu Bakar Bashir stepped out of the prison gates of Jakarta's Cipinang Prison a free man. He was welcomed with shouts of *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) by his supporters who had been waiting eagerly for his release. Bashir's freedom, not surprisingly, grabbed headlines around the world given his status as the *amir* or spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an organization suspected to be responsible for several bomb attacks in Indonesia. Among those who welcomed Bashir's release were his supporters from organizations such as the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) and the Islamic Defenders Front. There were also sympathizers who do not agree with Bashir's role in JI or the radical methods of JI but nonetheless identify with his goal of establishing Syariah law in Indonesia. These came from such organizations as the United Development Party (PPP), the Betawi Brotherhood Forum (FBR), *Misi Islam* (Islamic Missions) as well as other Islamic community groups such as the *Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia* (DDII) or the Indonesian Islamic Proselytizing Council.

During his time in prison, a number of politicians, religious leaders and Islamic community representatives had also visited him. For instance, a day before his release, he received Egi Sujana, head of Serikat Pekerja Muslim Indonesia (SPMI) or the Indonesian Muslim Labour Union and board member of the Muslim-based PPP. Bashir also received two other personalities -- Fuad Bawazier, a former finance minister from the Suharto era and head of KAHMI, the Islamic Students Alumni Association, and Fajar R. Zulkarnaen, leader of HMI-MPO, an affiliate of the Islamic Students Association. In contrast, personalities who were known to be close to Bashir, such as AM Fatwa, a vice chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly or MPR, and Habib Rizieq, head of FPI, seldom visited him in prison.

Lobbying for Syariah law in Indonesia

Following his release, Bashir issued a statement urging Muslims to support him in his struggle for the establishment of Islamic Syariah law in Indonesia. Significantly, he also stated that he would continue his struggle for Syariah law through peaceful means, using *dakwah* or missionary work. He would also return to teach at his former school, Pondok Pesantren Al-Mukmin, Ngruki in Solo, Central Java.

As highlighted by the Indonesian media, Bashir's future role would focus on giving sermons throughout the country. This activity will form part of his role in his organization, MMI. In the near future, MMI's aim, as spelt out by one of its leaders, Fauzan Al-Anshori, is to influence local Islamic communities to lobby their regional representatives for Islamic law at

the local level. More specifically, one of MMI's goals is to reform the Indonesian penal law to make it more in line with Syariah law.

Given the socio-political conditions in Indonesia, support for Syariah law in Indonesia remains strong. In fact, in several areas such as Tangerang, West Java and South Sulawesi, Syariah law has already been implemented. At the national level, support for the implementation of Syariah law is evident to some extent in the lobbying for the anti-pornography law. The increasing number of supporters for the implementation of Syariah law may prove advantageous for Bashir in the future.

So far, 56 Indonesian legislators have objected to the bills on the implementation of Syariah law at the local level. This notwithstanding, Bashir will undoubtedly attempt to gain support for Syariah from other religious leaders. In fact, meetings between religious leaders, politicians and Bashir during his prison stay could be seen as part of his strategy to organize and coordinate his future plans to establish Syariah law and an Islamic state in Indonesia.

Future Plans for JI

Interviews have shown that a key goal for Bashir after his release is to turn JI into a formal Islamic community organization from its current status as a loose amorphous movement. Bashir would like to unify JI, especially between the mainstream and the pro-bombing factions at one level and between JI and MMI at another. Bashir has managed to integrate some circles of Islamist militants into MMI. Like Bashir, several MMI board members had been implicated in militant opposition to Suharto during the early years of the Islamic resistance movement when Suharto was in power. The current challenge for Bashir is to embrace the JI's pro-bombing faction into the MMI struggle. This could have a moderating effect on this faction. If he is successful only in integrating the JI mainstream, then the rift between him and the pro-bombing faction, currently under Noordin Mohamad Top, would deepen, given that this faction disagrees with Bashir's non-violent methods. Bashir's vehement opposition to the pro-bombing faction was reflected in his first sermon in Pondok Pesantren Ngruki. In this sermon, Bashir pointed out that Noordin was wrong to conduct terrorist acts in a peaceful country such as Indonesia. However, this is a controversial issue among the Islamists themselves.

The notion that Indonesia is a peaceful country has been hotly debated among Bashir's JI members and supporters. During a Ngruki alumni meeting held at the pesantren there in late January 2006, some participants advocated that the conditions in Poso, Central Sulawesi and Ambon, Maluku warranted the declaration of Indonesia as a war zone. Owing to this, some participants believed that it would be permissible to conduct terrorist operations as part of an overall offensive strategy to prevent Muslims from becoming infidels. There was no formal declaration by the meeting participants. Nevertheless, all of them did agree that individuals conducting suicide bombings are mujahidin. Bashir has expressed his agreement with this in his first sermon. He recognized that Noordin, as a mujahidin, was doing his work in the name of Allah and for the good of other Muslims. This, however, can also be construed as Bashir's strategy to consolidate and win the hearts of the pro-bombing faction with a view to eventually reining them in.

Considering the rift within JI, Bashir will face future difficulties if he wants to gain support for the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia. However, the pro-bombing faction still has great respect for Bashir as a religious leader. Since he has just been released, the pro-

bombing faction will likely not execute any attack in the near term to prevent Bashir from being rearrested. Meanwhile, Bashir seems to be gathering sympathy for his view within the pro-bombing faction. It will be hard for him to control both factions since the rift has deepened but at least, by gaining their sympathy, it will give Bashir's mainstream faction an advantage.

Conclusion

Bashir will continue to preach his ideology for an Islamic state. The danger now lies in the possibility of the pro-bombing faction infiltrating Bashir's group of sympathizers for their operations, as they had done with Darul Islam factions. In the near future, the likelihood of attacks would be low. However, in the long term, with the increasing numbers of militant supporters for an Islamic state, the threat could increase. In addition, by trying to get more support from other religious leaders as well as through the internal consolidation of JI, Bashir would continue to be a figure to watch within the Islamist militant community.

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