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Abu Bakar Bashir Resigns from the Indonesian Mujahidin Council: What Now?

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The Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) has decided to accept the resignation of Abu Bakar Bashir, their leader. Some argue MMI will be crippled as Bashir could draw away most of its members. Will we see increased radicalisation as a result?

ABU BAKAR Bashir, the alleged spiritual leader of the regional terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), sent shock waves through the Indonesian radical community when he resigned last month as emir of the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI/Indonesian Mujahidin Council), an Islamic organization seeking the implementing of the *shariah* in Indonesia. Bashir submitted his resignation on 19 July 2008, a few weeks before MMI held its third congress. Attended by 600 people, the congress chose Muhammad Thalib, formerly the vice emir of the *Ahlul Halli wal Aqdi* (Legislative Council) to replace Bashir as the head of the council. Meanwhile, Irfan Awwas was re-elected as the chairman of *Lajnah Tanfidziyah* (Executive Council).

Why Bashir resigned

Bashir's official reason for resigning was that he was dissatisfied with the current decision-making process within MMI. He accused the MMI of implementing democracy, a system that he claimed to be derived from the non-believers and thus not in line with the Islamic *shariah*, where decisions are made collectively. He argued that the Islamic style of decision-making gave power to the emir as the most influential single decision maker within the organisation.

What precipitated Bashir's decision to resign was a power struggle with Awwas. Bashir felt that Awwas, with his multiple roles in MMI, had accrued more power over decision-making. As the emir, Bashir thought he should have absolute power, but instead he had been reduced to a symbolic role. Apparently, Awwas' faction won this dispute and secured both his re-election and the emir's position for his close ally Muhammad Thalib.

However, Bashir claims that he still enjoys the support of MMI's regional administrators and half of

the 58 branches, such as branches in East Java, Central Java, East Kalimantan, Solo, Medan, and Jakarta. With his loyal followers, Bashir plans to establish a new organisation by the middle of September 2008. This new organisation, he insists, will implement the true Islamic style of decision-making where the emir, he claims, possesses the highest authority and his decisions cannot be debated. The proposed name of the new organisation is *Jamaah Anshoru Tauhid* (JAT).

Splits within extremist groups are not new. Personalities and policy interpretations are frequent causes for division. Puritanical Islam is no exception, where claims to the true salafi interpretation and commitment to the Qur'an and *As-Sunnah* often rest on obscure differences. The reason for Bashir's departure will eventually surface in his new organization as well even if the base is now made up only of loyalists.

What next for MMI? The likely scenarios

Despite the claims of an ideological rift, MMI's problem appears to be more about power politics. The rift dates to the removal of Fauzan Al Anshori, Head of Data and Information Department of MMI, on 30 June 2007. Fauzan was circulating a plan to have Bashir run for president at the next presidential election. Awwas as executive leader of MMI, objected to Fauzan's move. Awwas claimed that the issue had not been discussed within the Legislative or Executive Councils, the two highest decision-making bodies in MMI, and took action against Fauzan. While not supporting Fauzan's effort, Bashir did not approve of the removal of Fauzan. In his view, a true Islamic organization was based on the undisputed authority of the Imam, or emir, in spiritual and practical matters. Unable to force this view on Thalib and Awwas, Bashir resigned.

The new appointed leaders of MMI quickly moved to consolidate their power. Abu Jibril Abdurrahman is the new first deputy Emir. He is Awwas' brother who was detained in June 2001 in Malaysia, charged with trying to establish a Southeast Asian Islamic state, and released in October 2004. Kamaludin Iskandar, who was present at the 13 July 2008 meeting where Bashir resigned, is second deputy Emir. The new leadership appears to share the same vision for the organization. Given their long working relationship – Thalib and Awwas worked together in Wihdah Press, a publishing company owned by Awwas – MMI should avoid further splits for sometime.

While there is stability at the top of MMI, what impact will the split have on MMI? One possibility is that MMI will be crippled. Bashir controls MMI's strongholds such as East Java, Central Java, and Solo, which will provide him with a very good base for his new organization *Jamaah Anshoru Tauhid*. His name and structure provides a viable option for others who may be disappointed with MMI as well as other like-minded groups and individuals. Bashir has potential to draw large crowds, as seen during the Third MMI Congress which was well attended despite the absence of three regional representatives of the largest groups, DKI Jakarta, West Java and East Java.

Another scenario has MMI doing just fine. The departure of Bashir has not damaged the radical credentials of MMI. Radical leaders such as Abu Jibril Abdurrahman, who is also the leader of the Laskar Mujahidin of MMI, and Irfianda Abidin, Head of West Sumatra Branch of KPPSI, still support MMI. KPPSI is an Islamic organization based in South Sulawesi aimed at promoting Islamic *shariah* in the province. Its armed wing, Laskar Jundullah, was involved in the Poso conflict and may be linked to JI, Bashir's former organization.

It is far too soon to draw any conclusions with respect to the impact of the split. It is important to note, however, that the split is based on methods of decision-making, and not the ends of MMI. Both MMI and JAT will remain committed to the implementation of the *shariah* through non-violent means. Thus one thing that is clear from the split is that the radical community in Indonesia will become more crowded. But will it become more extreme as new and older groups compete for pre-eminence?

The main feature that MMI, and presumably JAT, share is an ambivalent attitude towards non-

violence. Each group has committed to an exclusive non-violent path, yet MMI maintains a 500 member armed wing, Laskar Mujahidin. The Laskar Mujahidin deploys at every MMI Congress, and is accused of conducting secret paramilitary training in Salatiga and Tawangmangu, Central Java. MMI denies this is threatening. JAT may follow this path.

Whatever the ultimate outcome, Bashir has managed to grab attention and made himself appear relevant within the radical community. His break with MMI highlights his vision for Indonesia - a theocratic dictatorship with an ambivalent commitment to non-violent politics. This posture offers the best evidence of what is at stake if a figure with Bashir's ideas leads the country.

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