

How the Cartoon Controversy May Spur Terrorism in Southeast Asia

Publication: Terrorism Focus Volume: 3 Issue: 7

February 21, 2006 04:28 PM Age: 4 yrs

By: Zachary Abuza

While the protests over the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed have spread to Southeast Asia, they have been smaller and less lethal than in other parts of the world. Yet, especially in Indonesia, a number of small hard-line groups and militant organizations have been at the forefront of the demonstrations and are effectively mobilizing themselves over the furor. These groups have been probing society looking for ways to inject themselves into the mainstream.

Demonstrations

Demonstrations in Southeast Asia began on February 3 in Indonesia, when the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) mobilized 300 people to demonstrate in front of the Danish Embassy, briefly entering the lobby of the office building which houses the embassy. The Danish ambassador defused the situation after meeting with several protestors and offered an apology. On February 5, the demonstrations spread to Indonesia's second largest city and commercial hub, Surabaya. At least 200 protesters stoned the Danish Consulate before descending on the U.S. Consulate, where police had to fire warning shots to disperse them. According to the February 14-20 edition of the Jakarta-based publication Tempo, on February 10 the "quietest" Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahrir led a protest of 2,000 in downtown Jakarta.

In Malaysia, the protests began in early February on a small scale, although by the second week they had grown to over 3,000 people. These were the largest demonstrations in Malaysia since the protests over the sacking of the popular deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1999. Although the demonstrations were peaceful, they were also checked by a very robust security presence.

Protests have also spread to the Muslim minority states of Thailand and the Philippines, both of which are plagued by Islamic insurgencies in their restive southern regions. On February 6, 300-400 Muslims from the troubled south protested outside the Danish Embassy in Bangkok. Demonstrations were also organized in the southern Philippine city of Cotabato. Although a Muslim member of parliament organized the demonstration, placards menacingly threatened to "Behead those who insult Islam," according to the Philippine Daily Inquirer on February 15. Hundreds of other protestors burnt Danish flags in front of Manila's main mosque.

Who is Behind the Unrest?

In Malaysia, the demonstrations have been somewhat spontaneous, emanating from mosques after Friday prayers. In Malaysia, where the government has draconian laws at its disposal and is guarded against Islamic militancy, there is no evidence that militant organizations are behind the unrest. Indeed, even the Islamic opposition party, PAS, has been notably quiet. The PAS daily, Harakah, has carried stories on the cartoon furor, but for the most part has focused on the situation abroad for fear of the government accusing them of inciting sectarian conflict (<http://www.harakahdaily.net>). On February 17, Harakah carried stories about demonstrations against the U.S., in which an effigy of President Bush was burnt, but it was clear to disavow PAS' role in organizing the protest.

Likewise, in the Philippines and Thailand there is no evidence that any of the secessionist organizations have been behind demonstrations. Surprisingly, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has not even posted a story about the cartoon controversy on its website—located at www.luwaran.com—out of fear of giving skeptics in the government any reason to view MILF as radicals and thus scuttling the peace talks. While the secessionists in Thailand and the Philippines do not appear to have a hand in the protests, it is clear that they are benefiting from public anger and perceptions that the West is truly Islamophobic; this plays into the broader popular sentiment that the war on terrorism is patently anti-Muslim. The secessionist organizations have always presented themselves as the defenders of Islam and its honor.

The situation in Indonesia is more troubling. The hard-line FPI organized the first demonstrations. The FPI is the leading anti-American and Western movement in the country. It has organized large demonstrations condemning the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Its leader, Habib Rizieq, has repeatedly demanded that the government cut all ties and cooperation with the U.S. The FPI recruited several hundred mujahideen to fight the Americans in Iraq, but only a few actually made it there.

The FPI was also at the forefront of attacks against a Muslim sect, Jemaah Ahmadiyah, and in early July 2005 several hundred FPI members led a group of 1,000 vigilantes to attack the Ahmadiyah annual congress that was being held in Bogor (Jakarta Post, September 21, 2005; Straits Times, July 28, 2005). The FPI has also led attacks on the offices and threatened the physical safety of members of the secular organization Liberal Islam Network (Jakarta Post, September 7, 2005). The FPI has also supported the sectarian strife in the Maluku and in Central Sulawesi where Indonesia's primary terrorist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah, is fomenting strife in an attempt to regroup.

While the demonstrations themselves were not overly threatening, those behind the unrest in Indonesia suggest that the situation will become more violent. As stated in the Financial Times on February 12, there were allegedly telephone threats to the Danish Embassy in Jakarta threatening violence and reportedly terrorism. According to a February 13 article in Singapore's Today, Denmark ordered its diplomats to be evacuated and called on its citizens to leave Indonesia "because of a significant and imminent danger for Danes and Danish interests in Indonesia." Later, 175 students in a Surabaya madrassa signed a pact saying that they were "ready to die" for the Prophet Mohammed. On February 19, some 200 members of the FPI attacked the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta with stones. One organizer told the press, "This is not the last warning. This is only the beginning. There will be bigger actions against them." In short, this has the potential to become more violent and will target broader Western interests (Tempo, February 14-20).

In response to the cartoon controversy, authorities clamped down on the press. In Malaysia, the government suspended the publication and forced the resignation of the editor of a small daily, The Sarawak Tribune, for his "insensitive and irresponsible" publication of the cartoons (AP, February 9). On February 9, Malaysia "declared it an offense for anyone to publish, produce, import, circulate or possess the caricatures" (Human Rights Watch, February 15). Days later, a Chinese-language magazine, Guangming, was reportedly shut down for simply showing a picture of a reader of a newspaper overseas looking at the cartoons. In Indonesia, the editor of a Christian magazine, Gloria, was sacked for running three of the 12 cartoons. Additionally, a tabloid, Peta, was withdrawn from circulation and the editor charged with blasphemy (Reporters Without Borders, February 10).

Conclusion

The protests in Southeast Asia are gaining traction and allowing Islamists to forge both a greater sense of solidarity and identification with their co-religionists around the world. This reinforces the already high-degree of anti-Americanism prevalent in the region. More importantly, it gives radicals and Muslim moderates a common cause and deepens the potential pool of recruitment for the Islamists. The protests could also become a pretext for violence, especially by groups like the FPI.

Yet, Southeast Asia also provides a way forward. A spokesman for Indonesia's largest and decidedly moderate Muslim Organization, the Nadhlatul Ulama, called for calm and for Muslims not to be provoked by what he called "the stupid actions of those who belittle our Prophet" (Laksamana.net, February 10). Even Din Syamsuddin, the head of the second largest Muslim organization, who has hard-line Islamist tendencies, stated, "Do not go overboard and get trapped into a situation that can be used by elements bent on painting an image of Indonesia's Islam as intolerant, rigid and anarchic society [sic]."

On the other hand, while the Malaysian government is working to diffuse the situation, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has warned of a "huge chasm that has emerged between the West and Islam," as Westerners see Muslims as "congenital terrorist[s]." He further stated that the "demonization of Islam and the vilification of Muslims, there is no denying, is widespread within mainstream Western society" (BBC, February 10).

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