

# It is Not Getting Worse: Terrorism is Declining in Asia

## By John T. Sidel

**In the aftermath of the October 18 car-bomb attack on Benazir Bhutto's motorcade in Karachi, a chorus of "terrorist experts" immediately chimed in with the standard refrain that has accompanied incidents of Islamist terrorist violence since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US.**

THE BOMBING, THEY SUGGESTED, served as a powerful reminder of the persistent threat of Al Qaeda-linked or Al Qaeda -inspired terrorism and the need for continuing action in the "Global War on Terror." Five years after the October 2002 bombings in Bali, they confidently asserted, terrorism in the name of Islam is alive and well in Asia.

Against such alarmist conventional wisdom, I offer an alternative, contrarian perspective. In contrast with the predictable hand wringing that follows each incident of terrorist violence in the name of Islam, my point of departure is the striking paucity, infrequency, and narrowness of Islamist terrorist activity across most of Asia, the home of more than 700 million Muslims. Indeed, as Mike Davis has shown in his recent book, car bombings are easy and inexpensive to organize, and thus what is truly surprising is how few of them we have seen in recent years.<sup>1</sup> *If anything, the recent Karachi bombing reminds us of the broad overall decline* in Islamist terrorist violence in Asia since the Bali bombings. This pattern is most evident if we examine the trends of Islamist violence in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, which serves as an illuminating point of comparison with Pakistan.

This is not a recipe for complacency, but rather a necessary step in explaining the pattern of violence that has unfolded in Asia. It is not enough to identify the perpetrators of the violence, their motives and their modus operandi. What remains to be understood is when, where, how and against whom terrorist violence is perpetrated; to this end what has *not* happened is as instructive as what has. Thus, I argue that the recent car bombing in Pakistan can be more fully explained through a comparison with Indonesia, and against the backdrop of a broad trend of declining violence in the name of Islam throughout Asia.

1 Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (London: Verso, 2007).

2 For an excellent broad overview, see: Martin van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in post-Suharto Indonesia," *South East Asia Research*, Vol.10, No. 2 (March 2003), 117-154.

3 *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix* (Southeast Asia/Brussels: International Crisis Group, September 2004).

**INDONESIA: THE EXTRUSION OF JIHAD**

Of all the countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the most prominent site for Islamist terrorist activity and broader Islamist influence. It is in Indonesia, after all, where the most frequent and deadliest bombings of recent years have occurred. It is an organization said to be based in Indonesia and largely led by Indonesians — Jemaah Islamiyah — that is identified as the hub of Al Qaeda-linked or Al Qaeda-inspired terrorist activity in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the terrorist bombings in Indonesia attributed to Jemaah Islamiyah since 2002 have targeted sites of foreign influence — the Bali night-clubs (October 2002), the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta (August 2003), the Australian Embassy (September 2004), and restaurants catering to tourists in Bali (October 2005). As a result, these bombings have attracted considerable international attention.

Most accounts portray the bombings as the work of JI, whose origins, orientation, and activities are described at some length and with varying inflections. At first glance, the identification of the perpetrators — the “whodunit”— would appear to suffice as an explanation for the violence of 2000-2005. After all, the JI bombers were distinguished by at least some clandestine links to Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, by lineages stretching back to the armed Darul Islam movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. More broadly, Jemaah Islamiyah has loose affiliations with legal, aboveground Islamist organizations in Indonesia known for their strict puritanism, strident anti-Christian, anti-secular and anti-Semitic rhetoric, and strong transnational connections to Salafi and Wahhabi currents in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

Yet what remains unexplained is the timing of these bombings and the shift in the targets of the explosions from local Christian church-

**The terrorist bombings in Indonesia of recent years appear less as the product of essentially external influences than the most recent variation on a recurring theme in Indonesian history.**

es around the archipelago in 2000-2001 to the foreign sites of 2002-2005. Islamists were bemoaning the weakness of Muslims in the face of a dynamic Christianity in the 1930s and railing against “Christianization” and the closet secularism of liberal, Western-influenced Muslim intellectuals throughout the 1990s. Yet at no point during these years did these Islamists take up arms or explosive materials, apart from Darul Islam’s clashes with the government in the 1950s, and indeed only a very small fraction within the broader family of Islamic activists did so in the peak years of *jihād*, 2000-2005.<sup>3</sup> Even the attribution of this *jihād* to Al Qaeda and its operatives leaves crucial questions unanswered: why no paramilitary mobilization or bombing campaign before 2000? Why the shift from Indonesian targets to foreign ones in the bombings of 2002-2005? Finally, why has there not been more religious violence in Indonesia since 2002, rather than a reduction to a single annual explosion, or by 2007, its virtual disappearance?

**THE RISE AND FALL OF ISLAMIST FORCES IN INDONESIA**

The answers to these questions lie in no small measure in the context of Indonesia at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in the shifting position

<sup>4</sup> This argument, as spelled out in the paragraphs to follow, is elaborated more fully in John T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

of Islam within it. Indeed, the conjuncture that served as the backdrop to the bombings of these years was one distinguished by a new configuration of religious authority and power. In contrast with the preceding decade of steady ascendancy and rising assertiveness by forces associated with the promotion of Islam in the Indonesian state and public sphere, the turn of the century saw the rise and decline of the Islamist project in the country, in a rather sudden and dramatic reversal of fortunes.<sup>4</sup>

Under the auspices of the authoritarian Suharto regime, the 1990s had witnessed the dramatic “rise of Islam” in Indonesia. By this time, three decades of sustained economic growth, urbanization, and the extension of the tertiary educational sector had brought into the ranks of the educated urban middle class an unprecedented number of Muslims coming from pious backgrounds. This trend was evident in the growing prominence of devout, mostly modernist, Muslims in the business world, on university campuses, in the mass media and in the Armed Forces, the bureaucracy, and other power centers within the state that had previously been dominated by Christians and secularized Muslims.

The creation of the All-Indonesian Association of Islamic Intellectuals (ICMI) in 1990 reinforced this trend. With Suharto’s long-time close associate (and later vice president) B.J. Habibie as its chairman, ICMI became an important network for recruitment into the political class and a well-endowed source of patronage. Under its auspices, support for “Muslim professionals” was fairly matched by promotion of “professional Muslims,” as ICMI backed a diverse range of Islamic publishing, preaching, and associational activities. Embedded within the authoritarian state, and enjoying unparalleled opportunities for state promotion of Islam, ICMI gave great hope to Islamic activists

interested in overcoming Indonesia’s famous diversity of Islamic practices, and promoting a modernist, reified notion of Islam. Thus the resignation of Suharto in May 1998 and the immediate assumption of the presidency by Vice President Habibie represented the triumph of the “Islamic Trend.”

With the elections of June 1999, however, the fiction of a united Muslim population dissipated into a welter of competing Islamic parties, and dissolved in the face of strong electoral showings by non-Islamist parties among Muslim and non-Muslim voters alike. Indeed, a clear plurality of the vote (34 percent) was won by Megawati Soekarnoputri’s Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), a party known for its secular, ecumenical, and syncretist leanings and sizeable non-Muslim constituencies and membership. More than one-third of the members of parliament elected on the PDI-P ticket were non-Muslims (mostly Protestants), and virtually none of its Muslim MPs claimed a background of Islamic education or activism. By contrast, parties with avowedly Islamist agendas achieved less than 20 percent of the vote, and the Partai Amanat Nasional (National Mandate Party) led by Amien Rais, the chairman of Muhammadiyah, a moderate Muslim association, won eight percent under an ecumenical banner with token non-Muslims in its ranks. The election ultimately revealed the universalistic claims made under the sign of Islam were partisan, particularistic and rather poorly received among the broad masses of the Muslim population.

Frank admission of defeat in the aftermath of the June 1999 elections was avoided only thanks to the peculiarities of Indonesia’s inherited system for indirect election (since abandoned) of the president by the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) in October of the same year. A group of Islamic parties cobbled

together a coalition to defeat Megawati and to elect as president the leader of the National Awakening Party, Abdurrahman Wahid, who was also the long-time chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim association in the country and a stronghold of traditional moderate Islam. But Wahid was quick to turn on his erstwhile supporters, removing from his cabinet or otherwise marginalizing ministers associated with the various Islamist parties and centralizing power in the hands of close associates drawn from NU circles (including his family members) and from the ranks of liberal Muslim and Christian groups with which he had long allied himself and NU, which was founded by his father.

As a figure associated with the promotion of religious tolerance, Wahid was especially concerned about the protection of Indonesia's minority faiths and extremely opposed to other Muslim leaders' efforts to rally public support for *jihad* in the provinces of Maluku and North Maluku and the Central Sulawesi regency of Poso, where inter-religious violence had claimed hundreds, if not thousands, of Muslim and Christian lives. Thus the same Islamic leaders who had publicly rejoiced at the election of a prominent Muslim figure to the presidency soon spoke of Wahid's betrayal of their trust and support, and began maneuvering to promote the early demise of his presidency. In mid-2000 and again in mid-2001, these Muslim parties and other anti-Wahid forces used the occasion of the Annual Session of the People's Consultative Assembly first to censure the president and then to compel his early removal from office.

In short, the context for the onset of *jihad* in early to mid 2000 was one of disappointment if not despair with regard to the precipitous decline and ongoing reversal of the gains for "Islam" in the 1990s. The country's new

president and most prominent Muslim leader, after all, was no longer an ally of Islamist forces but instead a representative of moderate Islam who was comfortable and cooperative with liberal, Christian, Javanist, and secular elements in Indonesian society and beyond. Moreover, the processes of democratization and decentralization unfolding since 1999 gave rise to manifold alternative interpellations — by spokesmen for *adat* (customary law), for aristocratic claims to traditional authority, for various ethnic identities and loyalties, for "indigenous peoples" and for a variety of local and national causes. All of these competed with claims made in the name of Islam. Against this backdrop, the atrocities committed by armed Christian groups against Muslim communities in various parts of Maluku and North Maluku in the final week of December 1999 and the first week of January 2000 signaled the apparent obliviousness and apathy of the Wahid administration, the mainstream media, and the Muslim population toward threats and indignities to Islam.

It was thus not only to assist co-religionists in areas of inter-faith conflict, but also to reassert and reawaken seemingly lapsed religious sensibilities that a call for *jihad* was issued by Islamist politicians and activists in the early months of 2000. The response assumed the form of paramilitary training and mobilization by forces identified with established Islamist organizations. Most prominent was the formation of Laskar Jihad by Ja'far Umar Thalib, a graduate of Islamic schools in Indonesia who had also studied in Pakistan (and briefly joined the *mujahidin* on the border with Afghanistan). Under Thalib's leadership, and with the connivance of sympathetic elements in the Armed Forces, a few thousand, young activists undertook paramilitary training in camps on Java in early 2000, and were subsequently deployed to

5 Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2006).

6 For a fine early account of Laskar Jihad's rise and fall, see: Michael Davis, "Laskar Jihad and the Political Position of Conservative Islam in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (April 2002), 12-32.

## The context for the onset of jihad in early to mid 2000 in Indonesia was one of disappointment.

Maluku as early as May of that year.<sup>5</sup> While this initial phase of jihad expanded to Poso in July 2001, conditions in Indonesia and elsewhere spelled its termination and transformation in subsequent months.

### 2001-2002: FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL JIHAD

Mid-2001 saw not only a massacre of Laskar Jihad troops in the Maluku provincial capital city of Ambon by the security forces, but further defeats for Islamists in Jakarta. The Islamist parties had failed to prevent the election of Megawati to the vice-presidency in 1999, and this position, combined with the strength of her party's contingent in parliament and her close connections to elements in the military establishment, made her the eventual replacement for Wahid in July 2001. While the Islamists had worked assiduously against a Megawati presidency in 1999, raising doubts about her Muslim faith and the suitability of a woman president, by mid-2001 the leaders of these parties were climbing on board the bandwagon that would bring her to the Palace. The head of a leading Islamist party agreed to serve as Megawati's vice-president, and representatives of other Islamist parties accepted seats in the new cabinet.

This acquiescence to Megawati's presidency came at a considerable price. First of all, it served as a public acknowledgement of the limits to Islamist advancement through party politics. By 2001, the various Islamist parties

had essentially given up on their efforts to insert phrases about Islamic law into the constitution. Within each Islamist party, this pattern of cooptation and cooperation with the Megawati administration gave rise to considerable grumbling — and threats of rebellion — from less well-connected and conciliatory elements, but the accommodationists prevailed.

In addition, the cooptation of Muslim parties allowed Megawati to pursue the "secular nationalist" agenda with which the PDI-P had long been identified, while offering scant protection to the Islamist activists who had mobilized in the years of the Habibie and Wahid administrations. Thus the months following Megawati's ascension to the presidency witnessed the escalation of the crackdown on Laskar Jihad by the security forces, leading to its forced demobilization and virtual disappearance from Maluku and Poso by early 2002 in the wake of the peace accords imposed on these two areas, the arrest of Ja'far Umar Thalib in early May and the disbanding of the group in October of the same year.<sup>6</sup>

But the networks of Muslim politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, clerics and retired and active police and military officers who had mobilized to support their co-religionists in Maluku and Poso faced a broader campaign of government harassment and intimidation as well. Most prominent in this regard was the well-publicized arrest and imprisonment in the Philippines in March 2002 of three

7 On the background and aftermath of this episode, see: *Manila Gate: Kontroversi Penangkapan Tamsil Linrung* (Jakarta: Merah Putih, 2003).

8 "Of Missiles and Terrorism," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 November 2001, pp. 22-23. See also: "Wawancara Paul Wolfowitz: 'Aksi Teror di Indonesia Disusupi Al Qaeda Al Qaeda'," *Tempo Interaktif*, 19 November 2001.

Indonesian Islamist activists on clearly trumped-up charges of smuggling explosives, a move allegedly made by the Philippine authorities at the urging of the new head of the Indonesian National Intelligence Agency (BIN), (Ret.) Lt. Gen. A.M. Hendropriyono, a close associate of Megawati.<sup>7</sup>

Following arrests made in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore in early 2002, moreover, a religious school in Ngruki, a small hamlet on the outskirts of the Central Javanese city of Solo, was identified as a recruitment center for alleged Islamist terrorist activists. Affiliated with puritanical streams in Indonesian Islam, this *pesantren* was alleged to be at the center of a "Ngruki network" of terrorist activities. K.H. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the founder of the Ngruki *pesantren* and, as of August 2000, the elected head of the Indonesian Assembly of Holy Warriors (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia) was called in for questioning by the police in early 2002 and arrested later the same year.

It was thus only in the midst of a domestic and international crackdown on Islamist activists in Indonesia that a bombing campaign against foreign — i.e., Western — targets began to unfold in late 2002, beginning in Bali (October 2002) and recurring at the Jakarta Marriott Hotel (August 2003), the Australian Embassy (September 2004) in Jakarta and restaurants catering to tourists in Bali (October 2005). As noted above, within Indonesia the entrenchment of the Megawati administration in mid-2001 spelled the decline and defeat, if not effective disappearance, of the Islamist project in parliamentary politics, while accompanying social trends worked to undermine efforts to strengthen religious solidarities among Muslims.

Meanwhile, the onset of the so-called War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11 soon encouraged the pursuit of Muslim fighters involved in the *jihād* in Maluku and Poso and the per-

secution and prosecution of a broader range of activists supporting their struggle. As early as November 2001, for example, US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, a leading hawk in the Bush Administration and a former ambassador to Jakarta, warned that "going after Al Qaeda in Indonesia is not something that should wait until after Al Qaeda has been uprooted from Afghanistan."<sup>8</sup> Accusations of Al Qaeda training camps in Poso, connections to *mujahidin* in Ambon, and linkages with Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Jemaah Islamiyah were soon issued by high-ranking foreign government officials, reported in the Indonesian media, and acted upon by the military, police, intelligence and judiciary arms of the Megawati administration. In tandem with widely publicized arrests

**Thus the Islamist terrorism of 2002-2005 in Indonesia should be understood not as evidence of an ascendant, insurgent Islam but as a symptom of the weakness of those who have tried to mobilize in its name.**

and accusations by authorities in neighboring Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, American pressure helped to expedite a crackdown on the networks of *jihād* fighters and conspirators that had emerged and expanded in Indonesia in the preceding years.

In short, the shift of Islamist violence from paramilitary mobilization in areas of inter-religious conflict to the bombing of foreign targets in 2002 reflected a new constellation of power relations and religious authority in Indonesia.

<sup>9</sup> On the role of Islamist parties and organizations in contemporary Indonesian politics and society, see: John T. Sidel, *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007), 29-39.

This new constellation was one in which the space for the promotion of Islam by the ballot had dramatically shrunk, and in which the channels of quiet collaboration between *jihadi* activists and sympathetic elements in the state and the political class were rapidly being closed down by powerful anti-Islamist forces in Indonesia and in the international arena. This new constellation, moreover, was also one in which the banner of Islam no longer seemed to carry the potential to mobilize and unify significant numbers of Indonesian Muslims, as crowds, voters or supporters of *jihad*.

Against this backdrop, the bombing campaign represented the extrusion of the internal contradictions and limitations of the Islamist project in Indonesia, with externalization forestalling, if not foreclosing, a belated acknowledgement of decline and defeat. This attempt to restore the visibility and viability of Islam at the moment of its relegation to a minor role within an emerging democracy coincided with the rise to global prominence of Al Qaeda and the retaliatory Global War on Terrorism. This, in turn, accorded foreign, especially Western, targets a special priority.

The terrorist bombings in Indonesia of recent years appear less as the product of essentially external influences than the most recent variation on a recurring theme in Indonesian history. The activists recruited for *jihad* in Maluku and Poso in 2000-2001 and for bombings in 2002-2005, seem to have been drawn from established Islamist networks with roots in the Darul Islam movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet these networks, it should be stressed, do not appear to have been involved in any form of religious violence in Indonesia in the intervening decades, which were free of armed insurgencies and terrorist bombing campaigns. Their engagement in full-time, full-blown terrorist *jihad* came only under certain specific circum-

stances — in the wake of rising popular mobilization and increasingly assertive claims on the public sphere and the state articulated in the idiom of Islam, and during a period of decline, defeat, disappointment, and disentanglement from state power for those forces most closely associated with the promotion of the faith.

Thus the Islamist terrorism of 2002-2005 in Indonesia should be understood not as evidence of an ascendant, insurgent Islam but as a symptom of the weakness of those who have tried to mobilize in its name. Small wonder that the small, fragmented clusters of terrorists operating under the auspices of Jemaah Islamiyah failed to produce more than a single car bombing in 2002-2005 or to carry out any successful terrorist plots in 2006 or 2007. As Islamist parties have incorporated themselves into peaceful parliamentary politics and accepted roles as junior partners to the dominant ecumenical parties in Indonesia's multiparty democracy, the promotion of Islam is being undertaken through legal, peaceful means.<sup>9</sup>

#### PAKISTAN: THROUGH AN INDONESIAN GLASS, DARKLY

Viewed against this backdrop, the Oct. 18, 2007 bombing of Benazir Bhutto's motorcade in Karachi can be understood in a rather different light from that of the alarmist "terrorism experts" so predominant in discussions of violence in the name of Islam across Asia. For if, as suggested above, terrorist violence has been a sign of decline, disappointment, and disentanglement from state power for Islamist forces, a desperate, defensive, rear-guard response to anti-Islamist ascendancy and aggression, then much about the contrasting patterns of declining — indeed disappearing — terrorist violence in Indonesia and recurring episodes in Pakistan over the past several years can be more easily and fully explained.

10 For a fine recent overview, see: Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

As in Indonesia, the broad context of Islamist violence and terrorist activity in Pakistan in recent years is a complex pattern of shifts in the position of Islam. Like the last decade of the Suharto era in Indonesia, military rule in Pakistan saw close state collaboration with Islamist forces and official backing for the Islamization of society, first under General Zia ul-Haq in the late 1970s and through much of the 1980s, then under the military-backed administration of Nawaz Sharif in the early 1990s, and again since the coup that brought General Pervez Musharraf to power in October 1999.

Compared to Suharto's Indonesia, however, the military's cooperation with Islamist forces in Pakistan involved both generous financial support for, and large-scale subcontracting of violence to Islamist parties and *madrassa* networks for purposes of both foreign and domestic policy. Islamist parties like the Jama'at-i Islami (JI) and the Jami'at-i 'Ulama-i Islam (JUI) served as faithful allies of the military in the streets and in successive elections from the late 1970s onwards, providing a counterweight to the popular Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) of Bhutto, who served as Prime Minister in 1988-1990 and again in 1993-1996. At the same time, moreover, the same Islamist parties and the Islamic school networks supporting them served as recruitment centers for the *jihad* organized by the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) both in neighboring Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in 1979 and in Indian-held areas of Kashmir next door from the late 1980s. Under Bhutto's second administration from 1993 to 1996 the ISI succeeded in promoting the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, with Kabul seized in 1996 and control over most of the country consolidated and maintained until the US-led invasion in late 2001. Thus Islamist forces in Pakistan came to

enjoy a degree of influence and access to coercive resources far beyond what their counterparts in Indonesia could imagine or aspire to during the same period.<sup>10</sup>

If the rise of the Islamists in Pakistan under military auspices reached levels of unmatched anywhere else in Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, so has their decline and disentanglement from the state been less complete than in Indonesia or other countries in the region. For unlike Indonesia, where the transition to democracy occasioned a dramatic pendulum shift that saw Islamist forces defeated, replaced, marginalized and then co-opted as junior partners by more powerful forces representing an ecumenical approach to religious faith, Pakistan has experienced a reversal of the tentative, incomplete processes of demilitarization and de-Islamicization that began in the 1990s. Unlike Indonesia under Megawati, the onset of the war on terror began in Pakistan under the auspices of a military regime heavily reliant on an alliance with various Islamist parties to keep at bay both the mainstream Pakistan Muslim League of exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, and the broadly ecumenical PPP of Benazir Bhutto (notable for her own partial Shi'a ancestry).

Against this backdrop, the shifts in relations between the military regime and Islamist forces over the past several years in Pakistan have been characterized by considerable ambivalence and ambiguity. On the one hand, Musharraf acquiesced in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, agreed to a formal cessation of support for armed insurgent groups in Kashmir previously supported if not organized by the ISI and provided support for the US-led war on terror, most notably along the border with Afghanistan. These moves have generated great anguish and anger among Islamist forces in Pakistan, as has been apparent in recurring demonstrations against

<sup>11</sup> For an overview, see the following fine reports by the International Crisis Group (ICG): *Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military* (Islamabad/Brussels: ICG, July 2002); *Pakistan: The Mullahs and the Military* (Islamabad/Brussels: ICG, March 2003); *Unfulfilled Promises: Pakistan's Failure to Tackle Extremism* (Islamabad/Brussels: ICG, January 2004); *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan* (Islamabad/Brussels: ICG, April 2005); *Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasa and Violent Extremism* (Islamabad/Brussels: ICG, March 2007).

**In terms of Pakistani politics, the bombing represented a desperate effort to defer or derail the formation of a new alliance between the Musharraf regime and the anti-Islamist Benazir Bhutto, with elections and possibly power-sharing arrangements looming on the horizon as a serious threat to the status quo for Islamist forces in the country.**

government policies, repeated assassination attempts on Musharraf himself and other violent conflicts such as the bloody siege at the Lal Masjid in Islamabad earlier this year. On the other hand, the Musharraf government has relied heavily on Islamist parties as key allies against Bhutto's PPP and Sharif's PML and against other forces resisting the regime in Balochistan, the North West Frontier Province, and the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). Thus, rather than a pattern of decline and disentanglement for Islamist forces under conditions of consolidated democracy as in Indonesia, an uneasy and ambiguous condominium has prevailed in Pakistan, one punctuated by recurring episodes of Islamist terrorism and violence.<sup>11</sup>

Viewed against this backdrop, the Oct. 18 car-bomb attack on Bhutto's motorcade in Karachi should be understood in very different terms from those offered by alarmist "terrorism experts." In terms of Pakistani politics, the bombing represented a desperate effort to defer or derail the formation of a new alli-

ance between the Musharraf regime and the anti-Islamist Benazir Bhutto, with elections and possibly power-sharing arrangements looming on the horizon as a serious threat to the status quo for Islamist forces in the country. In terms of broader questions concerning the threat of Islamist terrorism, violence and aggression across Asia, the bombing serves as a reminder of the awkward, anomalous position of Pakistan, one which owes much to well known Cold War history as well as the stubborn survival of military rule in the country over the years.

Indeed, looking beyond Pakistan across Asia it is only in the southern Muslim provinces of Thailand where small-scale violence in the name of Islam seems to be on the rise rather than on the wane under a new military regime. Here the context is first the undoing of long-standing accommodations between local Muslim power-brokers and Bangkok politicians by aggressive Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra beginning in 2001, and then the onset of centralized military rule with his overthrow in late 2006.

Across the rest of Asia, what little we see of violence in the name of Islam today is best understood as a defensive response to prevailing trends among the more than 700 million Muslims, for the most part living peaceful and increasingly prosperous lives in the diverse countries of the region.

**John T. Sidel is the Sir Patrick Gillam Professor of International and Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (2006) and *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment* (2007).**