

Jihad in Paradise

Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia

BY MIKE MILLARD

ARMONK, NY: M. E. SHARP, 2004

155 PAGES, PAPERBACK ISBN: 0-765613-36-0

A paucity of resources and literature still plagues the topic of terrorism in Southeast Asia despite horrific bombings in Bali, Jakarta, southern Thailand, the Philippines, and other places in recent years, and despite the connections established between these events and the worldwide activities of terrorist organizations. Millard's effort must therefore be seen as a welcome addition to this thin inventory.

He works from the comfortable vantage point of Singapore, certainly the safest and most convenient locale in the region, which can be a strength as well as a weakness. An overview of the region can be done in this city-state with better secondary information sources than can generally be found elsewhere. Reliability of information is key to understanding terrorism, after all, and Singapore's press and academic resources are trustworthy in their reportage and assessments of any country in the region (except for authoritarian Singapore, of course.) And Singapore itself has been a target of terrorist activities, a subject covered well by Chapter Three, though Millard points out that its government has confronted this threat more ably and efficiently than most. Millard does not necessarily rely upon secondary sources, however, for much of his reportage and narrative appear to be grounded in firsthand interviews and experiences.

Additionally, the author brings a talented journalism to his work, making *Jihad in Paradise* accessible to students unlikely to be familiar with the subject. His stories flow easily and often digress on points of personal experience, ideas, or living conditions; but these asides add to readability and interest. An effort as ably written as this one can be expected to whet the interest of prospective Asia scholars, and that is all to the good.

One can wish, all the same, for a tighter grasp on this all-important topic. The approach and style suggest entry into the topic at some random middling (or muddling) point and a more or less unsystematic presentation of what the author has found.

Millard is justifiably and genuinely alarmed about the kinds of terrorists in the region who have established Al Qaida connections and seek their quite impossible dream of an area-wide caliphate that would amalgamate (in necessarily rough outlines) Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the southernmost parts of the Philippines and Thailand. This is a stated aim of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), the pre-eminent terrorist group of Indonesia, which has now developed roots and branches throughout Southeast Asia. JI has been connected to the bombings in Bali, and to bombings of churches and embassies in Jakarta as well as malls and eateries in Eastern Indonesia. It is also notorious for its madrassas (schools) and their catechisms of hatred, and the travels of its followers between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and even Afghanistan.

The caliphate idea, needless to say, is not widely shared by the largely moderate Muslim majorities found in Indonesia and Malaysia nor, for that matter, by the minority Muslim populations of Singapore, the Philippines, or Thailand. It is also a minority viewpoint within the armed Muslim insurgent groups in the region, since the largest of these, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, headquartered in Mindinao, eschews this goal. The MILF simply seeks autonomy for the Muslim population of the southern Philippines. Millard, unfortunately, does not clear up this important exception to the caliphate idea despite the organization's large size and its decades-long war of attrition. He slights the Philippines terribly in his overall treatment even when one considers the short and somewhat meandering nature of his book; and this is unfortunate because the Philippines serves not only as headquarters for the MILF but also for the significant and vicious Abu Sayyaf group of bombers and kidnappers, which has ties to both Al Qaida and JI.

It is not clear whether the caliphate idea, so central to Millard's narrative, is shared by other constituent elements of radical Islam in the region, such as Indonesia's Laskar Jihad or the Front to Defend Islam. These organizations are admittedly somewhat less effective than JI or Abu Sayyaf, but Laskar Jihad (which has at times denied Al Qaida connections) has caused both death and destruction in Ambon, the Moluccas, Solo (Surakarta), and other locales. These groups receive no mention either, despite their more-than-occasional prominence in the presses of Indonesia, Singapore, Bangkok, and the region generally.

A reader who limits herself or himself to this treatment of terrorism might gain the impression that terrorist acts in Southeast Asia are committed only by Muslims. But Christians have certainly been guilty of such grievous behavior in Indonesia and the Philippines; and if we enlarge this to the administration of state-sponsored terror, we can add Burmese and Thai Buddhists to this notorious column. Violence invoked by Christians in Ambon and the Moluccas in recent years, to cite two prominent non-Muslim examples, led to virtual civil wars as well as to intervention by volunteers from far-flung (mostly Jakarta) units of Laskar Jihad. This oversight of Millard is hardly unique, for one of the major mistreatments of the subject of terrorism since September 11, 2001, and even before, has been a tendency to say or believe that *all* of it derived from adherents of the Islamic faith. This general and unfortunate tendency hardly lets this author off the hook.

It is fair to assume, despite its many and even major lapses, that this little book can serve as an intriguing introduction to its subject for the uninitiated student. After all, there is not much out there yet, even though we can expect more research-driven writers and their publishers to soon begin offering more complete and hopefully even systematic efforts. One of the uniquely informative and early successes in this field is Zachary Abuza's *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Lynne Rienner, 2003), which combines firsthand experience in frankly dangerous areas as well as a depth of understanding and familiarity with both the broad outlines and the important details of what has become the region's greatest challenge. Abuza might very well be the next step for a student first piqued and intrigued by Millard. It is fair to say, however, that Millard stands up well enough on the terms he has set out. ■

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