

Indonesian Radicals on a Ramadan Holiday

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The Islamic

Defenders Front seems to have lightened up on 'evil'; this fasting month. Why?

It is Ramadan, so where is the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Indonesia's self-appointed enforcers of virtue? In past years during the Muslim fasting month, dozens of white robed and skullcap-clad cadres of the FPI have regularly descended on bars, brothels and nightclubs to 'remind' proprietors and patrons to respect the holy month by refraining from activities considered haram, or illegal, under Islamic law.

This Ramadan, however, the FPI has been conspicuously absent, and Jakarta's raucous nightlife seems to be continuing largely unabated.

The FPI's leaders say the group is currently 'consolidating,' but maintain that it has not diminished its activities even as its two most prominent members remain in detention. Habib Rizieq Shihab, the FPI's leader, and Munarman, the head of the FPI's militant, stick-wielding wing, are currently standing trial for inciting followers to attack participants of a June 1, 2008 rally in favor of pluralism and religious tolerance at the National Monument, or Monas, in central Jakarta.

'The FPI's activities are continuing as normal,' Rizieq told the Van Zorge Report in an exclusive interview from his Jakarta Metro Police 'jail cell' — the Middle Eastern carpeting, assorted Islamic magazines and books, air conditioning and computer make it feel more like the reading room of a well-funded Islamic boarding school. 'In fact, the FPI's activities have increased in frequency with me and Munarman here. Just a few days ago, hundreds of people went to the Presidential Palace to protest.'

Rizieq said he remains in control of the organization despite his detention. His array of mobile phones and the lack of restrictions on visits give his claim credence.

So why, if it's business as usual for the Islamic defenders this Ramadan season, would they tolerate the continued operation of centers of maksiat, the term for the whole gamut of vices from prostitution to drinking? The relative calm of the organization this season is all the more striking when one considers that it has made its annual 'sweeping' of such places the centerpiece of its effort to cultivate an image of the FPI as the true defender of Islam from what it sees as the pernicious influence of Western decadence and iniquity.

Ahmad Suaedy, executive director of the moderate Wahid Institute, was a participant in the June 1 rally that the FPI violently dispersed. According to him, the audacity of that attack, which injured scores

of peaceful rally supporters some seriously forced an otherwise weak-kneed government to take action against the FPI.

“The president needs the support of Islamic parties like the PKS, PPP and PBB,” said Suaedy referring to three prominent Muslim parties. “They control the religious agenda.”

This, he said, has left President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono unwilling to take actions that might possibly be construed as “anti-Islamic.” But an attack on a peaceful rally on Pancasila Day, the holiday that commemorates the state ideology enshrining religious tolerance left Yudhoyono and the National Police with little choice but to take action against the FPI.

Rizieq counters that the FPI’s shift away from sweeping does not constitute a tacit admission that the group has crossed a line, but rather that it is a calculated decision based on the FPI’s previous successes at putting vice elimination on the national government agenda. The fact that the government has issued new regulations on nightlife during Ramadan is a victory the FPI is quick to claim. Those regulations, he said, provide the FPI with a legal instrument through which to lobby the government for greater action.

“We have already protested to the government about places staying open 24 hours, but there are already regulations in place, so the FPI does not need to take additional action.”

The new regulations have indeed shortened the hours in which compliant bars and nightclubs operate. This may crimp the style of the night-long party crowd, and finding the cocktail list at local watering holes may require asking for the “non-Ramadan” menu.

Moreover, there are scattered reports of roundups of local prostitutes and drive-by attempts to let it be known to would-be Ramadan partiers in bar districts that they are indeed being watched.

Still, those in search of wine and revelry need not stray too far from their normal routines. Local bar owners, for their part, remain cautiously confident that the high tide of Ramadan raids has past.

A more compelling explanation for the FPI’s change of tactics probably lies in the changing dynamics of its relationship with the state. Rizieq described the five-step procedure the FPI’s various branch offices must follow when deciding which places to target.

The process involves first receiving a request from local citizens that the FPI pay attention to activity in a certain area, which the FPI then follows up with an investigation by its intelligence wing, Badan Intelijen Front. The FPI then submits an initial report and another follow-up report to the appropriate levels of government, gives the government an ultimatum and then and only then can it make a raid. No less importantly, the FPI chooses places where it minimizes its risk of “horizontal conflict” with other groups.

This last criterion ultimately appears to be the most restrictive. In fact, the FPI have found that their Ramadan anti-vice

campaigns threaten not just conflict with local gangs that benefit from nightlife activities, but also the protection rackets and criminal collaborations that keep the Jakarta police's pockets lined.

"The FPI opposes all preman [street gangs] and all mafia," Rizieq said, "and the police are the biggest mafia."

Much has changed since the late 1990s when the FPI emerged under the alleged stewardship of former Army chief and presidential candidate Gen. (ret.) Wiranto in order to weaken the student-led reform movement. While FPI leaders still boast support from elements within the state security apparatus — police complicity in the FPI's destruction of a number of mosques belonging to the Ahmadiyah sect would lend some credibility to these claims — the direct financial and logistical backing of non-state thugs that was a hallmark of the Suharto era and early reformasi period is increasingly a no-no in democratic Indonesia.

Rather than risk clashes with local gangs, and rather than backing the police into a confrontation, the FPI has instead opted to try to establish authority and legitimacy as the most "authentically" Islamic entity in the country by substituting increasingly fiery rhetoric for action that might bring reproach.

Referring to the June 1 Monas attack, Rizieq proclaimed, "The FPI didn't go too far. [The pro-pluralism rally members] went too far. That rally was an American creation. The Monas incident was just the beginning. In the future, there won't be any more American agents in Indonesia."

Rizieq and Munarman say they are in the process of forming a political party — never mind that the deadline to register for the 2009 elections has already passed. The existing Islamic parties, they claim, have lost legitimacy because none is truly based 100 percent on Islam. The FPI's tentatively named "Islamic Revolutionary Party," on the other hand, will bring together a who's who of radical, intolerant and uncompromisingly anti-democratic organizations in Indonesia.

Who knows, said Rizieq, "we could field [alleged Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist group spiritual leader Abu Bakar] Bashir as our presidential candidate — and Munarman could be minister of defense."

Common sense would suggest that this is an unreasonable goal in a country where Muslim parties have always struggled, and where even the hard-line Muslim Prosperous Justice Party has had to soften its tone in order to gain a foothold in the current political scene. An anti-democratic, revanchist party headed by the country's top terrorist guru may prove more than the Indonesian people can stomach.

The tide of public and official opinion may have already begun to shift against the FPI and like-minded thugs. Rizieq could not come up with an answer as to when the new political party would be formed, but it will come, Munarman finally quipped, "when we get out of jail."

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