

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post–New Order Indonesia.* By Noorhaidi Hasan. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2006. Softcover: 266pp.**

The first time that I met Umar Jafaar Thalib, the first thing that I noticed about him was that he had delicate manicured hands, an eerie juxtaposition to all the bloodshed for which he was responsible. Yet reading through Noorhaidi Hasan's *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post–New Order Indonesia* — the first book-length study that charts the decline and fall of one of the most visible symbols of post-Soeharto Islamic militancy — one gets little sense of the sheer brutality or scope of violence that plagued Indonesia's Outer Islands from 1999 to 2002. Much of the violence gets glossed over and many parts of the book are frustrating because very little attention is given to such critical points. But the book, which was based on 18 months of fieldwork and 125 interviews of members of Laskar Jihad, remains a wealth of information.

The book in many ways is much more of an intellectual history of the Salafi movement within Indonesia, and in particular, Jafaar's quest to become the movement's paramount leader. Chapter 4, for example, simply explains the Salafi ideology as it took root in Indonesia. The book begins with an analysis of the rapid emergence of Salafi mosques, *madrassa*, and *halqa* ("study circles"). It ties in local politics with the expansion of Saudi Arabian geopolitics and explains the emergence of what he considers a "new type" of Salafi students, in particular, those who went through Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Bahasa Arab (LIPIA). Under the constraints of the New Order regime, the nascent Salafi movement in Indonesia was forced to focus on what it considers to be its core mission: *da'wah*, and eschewing politics and militancy. Hasan's argument is that the Salafi movement, perhaps more than any other movement in Indonesia, was highly influenced by

exogenous factors: the Afghan war, Gulf charity funding, and the first Gulf war. As Soeharto's legitimacy waned in the 1990s with economic slowdowns and rampant corruption, he turned to the Islamists for support — a move that gave the Salafi movement more space. Yet the Salafi movement remained woefully disparate throughout the 1990s. Hasan explains both the doctrinal schisms and personality contests that kept the Salafis divided (pp. 54–58). To that end, Jafaar turned to the Saudi Arabian Hai'at Kibar al-Ulama (the Committee of Senior Ulama) led by Bin Baz to issue fatwas justifying Thalib's actions, and hence his authority — a tactic Thalib would use again in the coming years to crush his rivals in the Salafi movement (pp. 58–61).

Following a rift within the global Salafi movement over the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia in 1991, Thalib began publishing *Salafy* in 1996, which became his ideological mouthpiece. Hasan argues: "There is little doubt that the monthly *Salafy* quickly reinforced Thalib's image as a leading Salafi authority in Indonesia" (p. 85). *Salafy* was followed by a network of *pasentren*, Ihyaus Sunnah Network, though which Thalib fell out of favour and was ousted.

The move from quietest activities into political activism, always a wedge within the Salafi community between the strict Salafis and the Ikhwanists and Surusist, is charted in Chapter 3. As Hasan notes: "The dramatic shift of the Salafi movement towards political activism and militancy was inseparable from the political ambitions of the movement's leaders who saw that the rapid changes in the Indonesian political landscape would facilitate the orchestration of popular politics and the staging of collective actions" (p. 93). While some of the opening came from the rise of Islamist political leaders following the fall of Soeharto in May 1998, Hasan contends that it was the outbreak of sectarian conflicts that gave the Salafis not just the political opening, but a religious obligation to act — both a personal obligation (*fard ayn*) and a collective obligation (*fard kifaya*). Thalib with other Salafis established Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wah' Jama'ah, the umbrella organization for Laskar Jihad.

Forum Komunikasi questioned the "indifference" of the government to the plight of the Muslims in the Malukus (p. 209), and in particular to President Abdurrahman Wahid's coddling of Christians, communists, and his desire to forge diplomatic relations with Israel. For the conspiracy-minded Thalib, the Malukan conflict was something escalated by a Zionist-American conspiracy to rip apart the Indonesian state (p. 114). Here again, Thalib relied on the fatwas of no less than six leading Salafi clerics in the Middle East to justify the Laskar Jihad's jihad in the Malukus (pp. 116–21). Those

fatwas were used to declare President Wahid, the former leader of Nadhalatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, a *kafir* (infidel), who had abdicated his responsibility to defend Muslims from aggression. And in doing so, Hasan contends that the Salafis "appointed Thalib as temporary commander of their jihad mission" and ergo "temporary leader whose commands should be followed" (p. 155). Thalib's quest to become the *amir* of the Salafi movement was one step closer to fulfilment.

Despite extensive fieldwork and interviews, *Laskar Jihad* is not a quantitative study, but it sheds particular light on the process of exclusion and establishing parallel communities, cut off from secular society, what Hasan labels "enclaves". The author demonstrates how the leaders of Laskar Jihad encouraged members to live apart in terms of dress, norms, behaviour, and language, "a domain in which a resistance identity is created" (p. 181). While he admits that the public sphere of the Salafi movement "belongs only to men" (p. 180), there is little discussion of women's role within Forum Komunikasi and the Salafi community.

The 6 April 2000 meeting in Jakarta between three Laskar Jihad leaders and President Wahid, who refused to sanctify their vigilante defence of the Muslims in the Maluku, marked the start of armed conflict. Laskar Jihad began military training. Some members of Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) appear to have assisted in this process, but what Hasan fails to demonstrate is why the Indonesian government allowed Laskar Jihad to continue the training and then board government-owned ships bound for Ambon, an event that dramatically escalated the violence. The TNI's complicity in supporting Laskar Jihad's activities in Maluku must be understood in the context of what was happening in East Timor, a subject that goes completely unexplained. Far more on the role and involvement of the TNI needs to be researched.

Hasan argues that Laskar Jihad added little to the battlefield in terms of tactics or military skills; indeed, their "achievement in the Moluccas was, in many ways, strikingly limited" (p. 197). In general, Laskar Jihad was there to set up Koranic centres and to take control of abandoned mosques. Hasan rightly notes that much of the fighting was done by the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)-linked Laskar Mujahidin, and some foreign fighters, though he explains little about these groups or how they were related with Laskar Jihad. Indeed, there was often significant tension between them.

The March 2001 stoning to death of a member who committed rape was a turning point in the organization. Thalib used his religious

authority, again based on a fatwa issued in Saudi Arabia, to implement shariah, rather than simply calling on followers to obey it. He became known not only as a jihad leader, but also as one of the vanguard who supported comprehensive implementation of the shariah. It was as though he had challenged those who had previously spoken out about the need to return to the Jakarta Charter to step forward and prove their commitment to Islam (p. 199).

Yet again, while explaining the actions and implications, Hasan glosses over what happened on the part of the state: "Partly because of the demands of the aforementioned Muslim organizations, the police released Thalib and changed his legal status to that of house detainee. Following the pre-judicial trial, which determined that his arrest was illegal, the police eventually absolved Thalib of all indictments" (p. 199). This is hardly a convincing and satisfactory answer to why someone who unilaterally challenged the authority of the state was able to literally get away with murder. Likewise, Hasan is really unable to explain why it took the state so long to send troops to the Malukus, in August 2001, though his analysis of the repercussions on Laskar Jihad is quite strong.

There are a few factual errors regarding the JI in his discussion of the post-9/11 environment. There were no arrests of JI members until after the 12 October Bali bombings; indeed the Indonesian government was in an appalling state of denial regarding the scope of Islamic militancy within its borders. Likewise, the author overstates the popularity and resilience of Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network) which has been in significant retreat since 9/11, as other militant groups such as Front Pembela Islam (FPI, or Islamic Defender's Front) have intimidated its members, while the quasi-official Ulama's Council of Indonesia (MUI) have issued fatwas branding "liberal Islam" un-Islamic (p. 208).

There are other places that simply begged for a more thorough treatment and analysis. The jihad in Poso got only a paragraph (p. 205), yet the violence continues there to this day, as it does in the Malukus. While the author contends that Laskar Jihad had scant involvement there, the conclusion would have been an apt place to discuss the ongoing legacy of Laskar Jihad. While the group disbanded under the weight of internal factionalism and Thalib's rapid fall from grace, discussed in pages 211–13, the legacy of militant Islam continues to this day. The Indonesian government's apparent reluctance to take on these small *laskar* groups is troubling.

All too often groups such as Laskar Jihad and the FPI are dismissed as thugs. Hasan's work is integral to our understanding of

the profoundly theological nature of these groups. He explains the theological debates and schisms with clarity and consistency. Despite some limitations as mentioned above, *Laskar Jihad* is very balanced and eminently readable, and will remain the standard reference on the group. It should be read by anyone interested in Islamic militancy in Indonesia.

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