

# The Australian

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## Hardline Islam a bigger threat than terrorists

- **Tim Lindsey**
- From: **The Australian**
- July 07, 2011 12:00AM

**IT is a rare day indeed when former, present and shadow foreign ministers from different Australian political parties see eye to eye.**

But it is not difficult to understand why Alexander Downer, Kevin Rudd and Julie Bishop were united in rejecting Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's recent call to cut Australian aid to Indonesian schools. If anything, Australia should be planning to expand its support for reform in Indonesia and, in particular, for Islamic education - especially given Rudd's announcement this week of a massive increase in AusAID funding.

Indonesia's success in dealing with Islamist terrorists is impressive, but there are other Islamist organisations that are of much more immediate concern. These are public organisations that share a commitment to enforce very conservative interpretations of orthodox Sunni Islam. Indonesians call them "hardliners".

Unlike the terrorists, the hardliners are adept at working within the official system and have a real capacity to influence policy. Like the terrorists, their ultimate aim is to replace the state or at least remake it, but they seek to do so from within the system. They exploit the post-Suharto democratic state's more open political framework to gradually legislate much of what terrorists have sought unsuccessfully to achieve with bombs.

The hardliners represent a constituency repressed under Suharto's New Order that has determinedly reasserted itself since his fall in 1998. They include MUI , the increasingly conservative semi-official council of religious scholars, that the state sees as a privileged adviser on Islamic policy; the Justice Welfare Party , an Islamist political party that has previously said it wishes to create an Islamic state; and quasi-criminal religious vigilante groups such as the notorious Islamic Defenders Front. Tactics vary between these groups but they share the common goal of enforcing conservative Islamisation. They see liberal Muslims and non-practising Muslims as obstacles to these ambitions, along with Indonesia's many and varied religious minorities.

Pressure from hardliners at the national level has resulted in fresh restrictions on the building of some new churches; legislation imposing an obligation to teach Islam to Muslims in non-Muslim schools; and a law imposing new (largely redundant) bans on pornography. At the local level, hardliners have supported restrictions on gambling, sale of alcohol, sexual activity and women's dress, public behaviour and freedom of movement. The hardliners have also delivered a huge increase in "blasphemy" prosecutions of religious minorities, against a background of increasing violence. A clear pattern has emerged of condemnation by MUI of minority religious groups, followed by violent vigilante action and then state intervention to prosecute the targeted minority for religious crimes. Such a process involves breaches of the human rights provisions introduced by post-Suharto governments to distinguish themselves from his regime. Most Islamist vigilantes usually escape punishment.

This interweaving and blurring of state and non-state actors and of legal and extra-legal methods present a more significant challenge to Indonesia's new democracy than terrorism.

Under Suharto, his authoritarian government intervened as it saw fit. But the new multi-party system introduced after his fall makes minority governments reliant on other parties in the legislature, including Islamic ones, and they look to the hardliners for religious ballast.

There is much debate in Indonesia about whether continuing inaction against religious violence by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his (minority) government is a result of this, or whether they actually sympathise with the hardliners.

The rising influence of conservative Islamist groups in democratic Indonesia at the expense of minority religious groups and wider human rights and law reform efforts is now a major controversy in Indonesia. Unfortunately, this struggle within Indonesian Islam has been overshadowed in popular Australian perceptions by issues that resonate more directly with Australian interests, such as against Jemaah Islamiah, Australian drugs offenders, asylum-seeker arrivals, natural disaster relief and animal cruelty in Indonesian abattoirs.

Embattled Muslim moderates in Indonesia advocating reform in areas such as education, human rights, law, policing and so on now seek substantial support. They often look to foreign donors. AusAID's support for Indonesia's Islamic education system illustrates how this can work in practice.

Indonesia's school system began to disintegrate after the Asian economic crisis began in 1997. The government is working to reverse sinking teaching standards but struggles to meet its targets. Islamic schools (madrasah and pesantren) comprise almost one-third of the education sector. Typically poorer, they were among the most heavily hit by overall sectoral decline. This has contributed to the rise of Islamist hardliner influence.

In Indonesia, "madrasah" usually refers to a mainstream (and usually moderate) Islamic school that teaches the government's secular national curriculum across about 70 per cent of its offerings and receives a trickle of government funding in return. In the best madrasah, children learn English and Arabic as well as Indonesian, sit the national exams and graduate with IT skills, ready to work in a modern economy. AusAID has been active in Indonesian madrasah, supporting programs to strengthen teaching skills and improve still weak learning outcomes.

Unregulated Islamic schools that sit outside the national exam system are usually called pesantren. Some are good, but many offer a low-cost, traditional religious education to poor children, often with a dose of hardliner radicalism.

AusAID's Basic Education Program led to the building and fit-out of more than 2000 state schools, mostly in poor and remote parts of Indonesia. These offer alternatives to the conservative ideas taught in many pesantren and give poor, rural children a chance to sit national exams.

Madrasah and pesantren feed the national Islamic tertiary system, where an ideological struggle exists that reflects the wider national one. This is a battle between the moderate liberal reformers who lead the state Islamic universities and institutes and those hardliner conservatives working within them. Reformers seek to create a new, modern curriculum that meets global standards. The hardliners resist, wishing instead to produce the next generation of conservative activists and even some militants, as was recently shown by the presence of state Islamic university students among terrorists arrested in relation to a Jakarta bomb plot.

Militant Islamism ultimately seeks to overthrow the Indonesian state. Terrorists may not be strong enough to achieve that goal, but hardliners working within the system threaten a still fragile, decade-old democracy and the much older traditions of Indonesia's religious diversity. If Indonesia's education system continues to decay, further hardliner success may wreak great damage to our northern neighbour and to our own interests. A weakened or destabilised Indonesia would present as much economic and strategic peril to Australia might a hostile Indonesia.

Indonesian studies are already in rapid decline in Australia, weakening our capacity to engage with this vitally important neighbour. In 1972, when the White Australia policy was still in place, there were 1190 Year 12 students studying Indonesian in Australia. By last year there were just 1100, despite our population growing from

13 million to 22 million and our much vaunted "engagement with Asia". The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations says Indonesian is on track to vanish from our schools within eight years.

The federal government seems unconcerned by this and recently decided, inexplicably, not to renew funding for Asia literacy in Australian schools. Let us hope that Abbott's ill-conceived comments don't lead to disengagement with Indonesia's education system, too. That would only compound the mess we are making of the great competitive advantage geography gave us for the Asian century.

*Tim Lindsey is director of the Asian Law Centre and the Centre for Islamic Law and Society at the University of Melbourne. This edited extract from the latest Asialink Essay can be read in full at [www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au).*

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