

The radicalisation of Hambali

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The following extract from Radical Pathways shows how a quiet, young Javanese village boy became a radical and, later, the mastermind and chief planner of Jemaah Islamiah terror activities

Hambali was born Nurjaman Isamuddin in the quiet West Java town of Cianjur in April 1964.

Cianjur is situated in the lush volcanic belt of West Java, a region criss-crossed with so many streams and rivers that many villages' names begin with ci, meaning water.

West Java, moreover, was the seat of the powerful ancient Islamic sultanate of Demak and, much later, became the heartland of the Darul Islam (DI) charismatic group (it was a movement that took up arms to set up an Islamic state in Java in the 1950s but was put down by the authorities).

Nurjaman, who early on was nicknamed Encep, grew up in a village that was, until Kartosuwiryo's execution in 1962, very much part of the DI imam's self-proclaimed Negara Islam Indonesia (NII).

Legend has it that Demak's feared Islamic warriors would plunge their swords into their bodies without drawing blood, 'defying the pain through the strength of their faith'; as journalist Sally Neighbour rightly avers, this was precisely the kind of inter-generational religious 'fervour that gave birth to the Darul Islam rebellion' hundreds of years later.

The lingering impact of deep Islamic religiosity in Cianjur and its environs has been so strong and deep that as late as 2001, residents elected a local official charged with the mandate of implementing syariah-inspired measures, such as banning gambling dens and obliging female students to wear the veil to school.

Parochial schooling

ENCEP was the second child in a large family of 11 children. His immediate family was very pious.

He was, in fact, part of a line of Islamic scholars. His great-grandfather had founded a local pesantren (Islamic boarding school) and his own father ran a school in Cianjur and was an imam at the local mosque. Encep's mother taught religion as well.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a child, Encep was 'educated exclusively in religious schools' in the Cianjur area. These included elementary and junior high schools at a neighbourhood madrasah founded by a relative, followed by three years of senior high school. Along the way, Encep also joined an Islamic youth group.

For the first 20 years of his life, after he completed formal schooling in 1984, Encep Nurjaman, also known as Hambali, very much like (Bali bombing ringleaders) Mukhlas and Imam Samudra, had been deeply immersed in the wider subculture (the learned ways of

thinking, feeling and acting) of Darul Islam.

The deep, life-shaping impact of early socialisation into a highly parochial cultural milieu cannot be overestimated.

The cognitive tendency to interpret the outside world strictly through categorical, black-and-white Darul Islam ideological lenses - fuelled by a visceral Existential Identity Anxiety - was very much a defining characteristic of Encep's later spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Bashir.

It is telling that after Bashir had been incarcerated following the Bali blasts, his own lawyer felt compelled to admit: 'He is, first of all, a very simple man...but he is also a very determined man in his own way...His horizon is very primordial. Outside of Islam, he is very much ignorant in other matters.'

The 20-year-old Encep would not have been that much different.

Having been born into the heart of the Darul Islamic subcultural 'bouquet', he would have grown up deeply concerned about the welfare and sanctity of his Islamic 'group tent'.

This is likely one major reason why Encep, like Bashir, Abdullah Sungkar and countless other Darul Islamists, apparently took deep personal umbrage at the Tanjung Priok massacre in Jakarta in 1984 (when Indonesian forces opened fire on a group of Muslim protesters, killing at least 30).

This collective chosen trauma proved to be a key long-term radicalising factor, filling Encep with 'anger over the treatment of Muslims' and transforming him into a 'vocal opponent of the Suharto regime'.

Introverted youth

TO BE sure, there were other milestones along Encep's personal Radical Pathway to Bali 2002.

His childhood had not been particularly memorable. For one thing, Encep was a somewhat rotund, reticent and introverted child who, although very religious and diligent in studies, did not stand out as being especially brilliant.

He was no outstanding student, as Imam Samudra had been.

What must have been a further significant setback to Encep was his failure to secure a scholarship to study at a leading Islamic school in Malaysia because of insufficiently high grades.

His family did not have funds of its own to send him off for further education. Cianjur was a relatively poor area with few job opportunities, and his father's income was barely able to sustain such a large family in a cramped, single-storey house.

Encep later complained that his family was so poor and the village so waterlogged that they ate only green vegetables, never meat.

Having failed to secure the scholarship to Malaysia meant that Encep had to look for a job

immediately after graduation from senior high school in 1984. During the next two years, however, he was unsuccessful in this venture as well.

Illegal migrant

FINALLY, desperate, Encep decided to try his luck in Malaysia, so he set off in a boat to cross the Malacca Strait 'with no travel documents, no funds and no leads'.

He arrived in the port of Klang in the Malaysian state of Selangor - where a sizeable pool of Indonesian illegal workers resided - looking for work, and soon started selling chickens at a nearby market each morning.

He supplemented this by selling religious books, caps, rugs and apparently even kebab at the port in the evenings.

Encep managed to eke out a living and eventually was able to send money home as well.

To signify a new start, Encep changed his name to Riduan Isamuddin.

Riduan managed to share a house in Klang with other Indonesian workers, who unfortunately irritated him greatly by bringing home their girlfriends and generally displaying lax morals. Riduan began feeling homesick and tried to cope by burying himself in the Quran.

Homesick in Malaysia

RIDUAN'S homesickness soon compelled him to start seeking a surrogate 'father figure' in the vicinity. Riduan's behaviour at this point is suggestive.

Javanese culture has strong collectivist and large power-distance characteristics, and as a part of that milieu, Riduan would have been programmed from a young age to look to esteemed seniors for guidance for the right direction to take in life.

Cultural learning, however, was not the only factor at play in shaping Riduan's thinking, feeling and acting at this point.

Riduan's individual personality was another. Matthew Alper (an American neuro-theologist) has called attention to the reality that there are many instances of individuals who undergo a 'sudden cognitive transformation' and in a relatively short time join an 'organised cult or religion'.

Fragile ego

ALPER'S argument is that the reason for such sudden, significant deepening of religiosity is the fragility of the ego of such individuals.

He explains: 'The human ego is...very delicate...If it is not properly nurtured, a person may grow to develop any number of insecurities, neuroses or even psychoses. When a person with a weak sense of self reaches the preliminary stages of adulthood, he or she may not

feel ready to take on life's responsibilities.'

Riduan came from a very large family in which emotional distances would have been considerable - the age gap between him and his youngest sibling was a massive 21 years.

This hints at the strong possibility that one factor compelling Riduan to seek a father figure in Malaysia was a fragile, underdeveloped 'sense of self'.

According to psychiatrist Arthur Deikman, all human beings have two basic kinds of wishes. They desire a 'meaningful life, to serve God or humanity'; and they wish to 'be taken care of, to feel protected and secure, to find a home'.

Dr Deikman calls the latter human impulse the 'dependency fantasy' which, he adds, is a 'permanent part of the human psyche'.

Dr Deikman also points out that people who are vulnerable to following charismatic religious cult leaders also tend to be 'dissatisfied, distressed or at a transition point in their lives'; they desire a 'more spiritual life, a community in which to live cooperatively'; and they seek to 'become enlightened, to find meaning in serving others, or simply to belong'.

In short, it is this innate desire for a 'powerful, protective parent' - reinforced by 'fragile senses of identity and unhealthily developed egos' as a result of generalised parental neglect during childhood - that creates the crucial deficits of 'inner strength and personal stability' required to endure life's 'trials and tribulations'.

Alper observes that it is when the 'crisis reaches a threshold' that a 'breakdown occurs in which the suffering individual latches on to some religion to which he will soon convert'.

It is this cocktail of ego fragility amid a series of personal crises that lies at the root of sudden intensifications of religiosity.

By the time Riduan had arrived in Malaysia, he clearly was experiencing some of these transitional psychic stresses.

As noted, he had been unsuccessful in securing either a scholarship or employment and, as a result, had to uproot himself from Cianjur and set up a home in the unfamiliar surroundings of Klang port; he had to work very hard day and night to make ends meet; he felt ill at ease with the promiscuity of his relatively socially liberal housemates; and he seemed to long for the structure and certainty of his home community.

His father figure

THE combination of these factors soon propelled Riduan into the fold of the Sungkar-Bashir emigre network in Malaysia.

Riduan heard about these preachers from his fellow workers and went to hear Sungkar preach in Kuala Pilah in neighbouring Negri Sembilan state.

Apparently, Riduan was hugely impressed with Sungkar, who had earned the telling moniker 'Ustad Wahhabi'.

Riduan, deciding that he had found his father figure, became a regular at Sungkar's 'energetic sermons', faithfully making the trip down to Kuala Pilah once a month. Sungkar's sermons proved to be truly marathon affairs, lasting from 'sundown to sunrise the following morning'.

These times of intense religious fellowship facilitated the development of Riduan's networking with other Al-Mukmin exiles, as well as his deeper socialisation into the explicitly articulated ideology of Darul Islam.

It was also through Sungkar that Riduan was first exposed to the Global Salafi Jihad, the theme of the sermons by the fiery Malaysian preacher Abd Al-Zukar.

By the mid-1980s, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was entrenched, and Al-Zukar told his rapt listeners about Asian volunteers streaming to Central Asia to take part in the Afghan jihad. This was the cause that Riduan was looking for, the opportunity to live a 'meaningful life, to serve God or humanity'.

Riduan promptly accosted Sungkar to indicate his willingness to volunteer, and by 1987 was in the third batch of recruits that arrived in Camp Saddah along the Pakistani-Afghan border.