

**GENDERED
ASSUMPTIONS
AND
WOMEN'S LIVED
EXPERIENCES:**

*Interrogating “Violent Extremism”
and political violence from
the standpoint of women*

RADICALIZATION PAPER / INDONESIA



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INDONESIA'S ISLAMIST RADICALIZATION

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INDONESIA'S ISLAMIST RADICALIZATION

While violent acts by extremists establish the markers of contemporary Islamist radicalism in Indonesia, the scope of the phenomenon goes beyond these acts and the groups that commit them. This paper intends to outline the multiple forms that Islamist radicalization takes in Indonesia and the diverse and intersecting sites it occupies. It also attempts to illustrate the evolving nature of this phenomenon, both in terms of its social makeup and in relation to the state's response.

PORTRAIT OF ISLAMIST RADICALS

As soon as Soeharto resigned from his 32-year reign under the New Order regime, Indonesia's Islamist radicals planned their return from self-exile in Malaysia and from the fighting in Afghanistan. They were all affiliated with Darul Islam, the Islamist movement from the late 1940s that opposed the newly sovereign Indonesian state due to its secular nature. Upon return to the homeland, they played a key role in growing the Jamaah Islamiyah which was the predominant violent extremist group for the first four years of Indonesia's "Reformasi" era and which declared themselves to the world for the first time with the Bali bombing of 2002.¹ This trajectory, from Darul Islam to Jamaah Islamiyah and others that came after it, illustrates how radical Islamism has been a constant presence throughout Indonesia's contemporary history.

1. See Noor Huda Ismail (2018), *The Indonesian Foreign Fighters, Hegemonic Masculinity and Globalization*. Unpublished thesis at Monash University, and IPAC (2015), *Online Activism and Social Media Usage Among Indonesian Extremists*, Report No. 24, 30 October.

LIST OF ATTACKS BY EXTREMISTS IN INDONESIA: 2000-20212

March 31, 2021: A woman enters Indonesia's National Police Headquarters in Jakarta and fires a gun at several officers before she is shot dead.

March 28, 2021: Two suicide bombers detonate pressure cooker bombs outside of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in Makassar, South Sulawesi, during morning mass on Palm Sunday.

November 27, 2020: Suspected militants attack a village in Central Sulawesi province, beheading one person and slitting the throats of three others, before burning down their homes.

November 13, 2019: a suicide bomber blows himself up at a police station in Medan, Indonesia's third largest city.

October 10, 2019: A man attacks Indonesia's Coordinating Political, Legal and Security Affairs Minister Wiranto with a sharp object, stabbing him at least twice in the abdomen.

March 13, 2019: The wife of a recently arrested JAD leader blows up herself and her 2-year-old son in their home on the island of North Sumatra, following an hours-long standoff with Indonesian police.

May 14, 2018: Five family members, including an eight-year-old girl on two motorcycles launch an attack on a police station in Surabaya, East Java.

May 13, 2018: A family of six consecutively bombs three churches in a coordinated attack in Surabaya, East Java.

May 8, 2018: 156 Pro-ISIS inmates stage a riot at a terrorist detention facility at the Mobile Brigade Corps's headquarters, south of Jakarta.

August 15, 2017: Indonesian police arrest five alleged ISIS supporters suspected of attempting to make chemical bombs for attacks on the presidential palace.

June 25, 2017: Two assailants with links to ISIS stab a policeman to death in Medan, in western Indonesia, just hours before the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

2. Counter Extremism Project, Indonesia: Extremism and Terrorism, 2021. <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia-extremism-and-terrorism>

May 24, 2017: Two suspected suicide bombers detonate explosives at a bus terminal in Jakarta, targeting police officers standing guard along a parade route.

February 27, 2017: A suspected terrorist detonates a pressure cooker bomb and attempts to start a fire at a government building in West Java.

November 13, 2016: An assailant throws petrol bombs at a group of children outside of a church on the island of Borneo.

July 5, 2016: A suicide bomber on a motorcycle detonates in front of a police station on the island of Java, Indonesia.

January 14, 2016: Five assailants attack a major shopping and business district in Jakarta, killing four people and wounding 25.

July 17, 2009: Alleged JI suicide bombers attack the JW Marriott Hotel and the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Jakarta's business district.

October 2, 2005: Three suicide bombers carry out attacks at two sites on the resort island of Bali.

September 9, 2004: Islamist extremists detonate a car bomb outside of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta ahead of elections in both Indonesia and Australia.

August 5, 2003: A car bomb explodes outside of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, killing 12 people and wounding 150 others.

October 12, 2002: JI-affiliated extremists set off bombs at two crowded nightclubs – Sari Club and Paddy's – on the resort island of Bali.

December 24, 2000: JI executes its first major terrorist attack in Indonesia. Assailants bomb 28 churches in the capital city of Jakarta and throughout the islands of Sumatra and Java, killing 19 people and injuring more than 120.

The profile of Indonesians who became violent Islamists changed over time. The first generation comprised those who had a direct affiliation with what was left of the Darul Islam movement and was almost exclusively men. In contrast, the generation that came after the declaration of ISIS in 2014 was more of a mix of young recruits and included women.

Noor Huda Ismail, an expert on Indonesian Islamists who served as 'foreign fighters' outside the country, documented the lives of three of them and showed the diversity of their backgrounds.³ Abu Tholut, who was part of the first generation of Indonesian Islamists and had fought in Afghanistan under Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s to early 1990s, was the son of an army

3. Noor Huda Ismail (2018).

general under the New Order regime. While revering his military father, he grew to oppose Soeharto's government especially after joining a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) that was affiliated with Darul Islam. In contrast, Yusuf, who was sent by Jamaah Islamiyah for military training with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Southern Philippines in the early 2000s, was born in a small village and grew up in a small town in a family of farmers. As his schooling was in a secular public school, his interest in the jihad war was triggered by watching a video on the plight of Muslims during the war in Bosnia. Meanwhile, Ramdan, who joined ISIS in Syria with his family in 2015, came from a middle-class family and was an entrepreneur. His decision to leave for Syria was led by his experience of bankruptcy and divorce and by the encouragement of his uncle who also provided him with a new job in his business. According to his admission, Ramdan was mainly motivated by ISIS propaganda of a better social and economic life in the Islamic State, rather than by its call to fight the jihad war. The diversity of the social economic backgrounds of Islamists was also confirmed by a study at the State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga that documented the lives of 20 Islamists who had either been convicted under the anti-terrorism law or had returned or been deported from Syria.⁴ This study found that most of the Islamists from Central Java came from lower-income families in rural communities, while those from West Java had mainly urban middle-class backgrounds. In East Java, many of the Islamists came from middle-class families and received pesantren education.

After the arrest of two women who were planning to be suicide bombers, in December 2016, the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) produced three reports on Indonesian women involved in Islamist extremism.⁵ Women's role in Indonesia's long history of Islamist political movements has evolved over time. The Darul Islam movement started recruiting women in the 1980s but was given the limited role of organizing women-only dakwah (religious preaching) groups. The role of women further developed particularly when the Jamaah Islamiyah was expanding its reach after the New Order regime ended. The Islamist movement aiming to establish a Southeast Asian caliphate, relied on the institution of marriage – and therefore women – to implement their alliance-building strategy. IPAC notes the marriage of a Jamaah Islamiyah jihadi from the Mindanao (Philippines) camp to the daughter of a pesantren leader in Poso, Central Sulawesi, in 2003 when the inter-religious conflict had just ended, was one such effort of alliance building.

Once ISIS was in the picture, marriage became the key means for women who actively sought out ways to join the jihad mission. The marriage of Arti Alifah, a young woman from a well-to-do family in Jakarta to Uzair Cholid, the son of a pro-ISIS preacher implicated in the Surabaya church bombing of 2018, was a match arranged by Arti's mother and her pro-ISIS female allies. Arti's mother collaborated with Nikmah and her niece, Fitriah, whose husband was convicted of terrorism after robbing a bank, in search of a suitable husband with ISIS credentials. According to IPAC, the Arti-Uzair marriage was "a coming together of three networks. Arti's family had wealth. Uzair's family had religious credentials. [Fitriah's husband] Nibras's family had fighters. And through in-laws and classmates, especially from the girls' school that Fitriah had attended, each had contacts that extended the reach."⁶

4. Ikhwani, Kailani, Isnaini (2021), *The Narratives of Religious-based Extremist Groups in Indonesia: Educational Background and Religious Aspiration*. Convey Report, Vol. 4(1). UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta.

5. These three reports are: *Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists* (2017); *The Radicalization of Women Workers in Hong Kong* (2017); and, *Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia* (2020).

6. IPAC, *Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia*, Report No. 68, 21 September 2020.

The main game changer for women’s active participation in Islamist movements, however, was the virtual chatrooms in social media that Islamists used to communicate and congregate. Syhadah, a young Jakarta-based woman who wanted to compensate for her troubled teenage years by being more engaged in religion, eventually turned to jihadi literature and joined an Islamist publishing house to administer its online forum. To beef up her online activism, she adopted a male name and submitted writings to various jihadi blogs, including one named millisiarebellion.blogspot. A woman with the initials NJ administered the largest chat group in Telegram, with 850 members, and then ran an ISIS matchmaking group called Channel Ta’aruf. This channel reportedly had 941 members and 158 listings of pro-ISIS men and women looking for spouses. Meanwhile, there was also Aisyah Lina Kamelya, an Indonesian woman who created an international online group that connected ISIS supporters from India, Kenya, the Philippines, Egypt and Libya.⁷ In 2020, IPAC recorded a total of 39 women who had been convicted or were awaiting trial on the charge of terrorism. The background of these women illustrates the diversity of Indonesian women who join Islamist movements. Among them are not just students, professionals, and entrepreneurs, but also civil servants in the police force and the anti-narcotics agency.⁸

These portraits of Islamist radicals reflect the expanse and progression of their grip on Indonesians, including the unique dynamics for women and the critical role of the institution of marriage.



7. IPAC, Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists. Report No. 35, 31 January 2017.

8. IPAC, Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia, Report No. 68, 21 September 2020.

ISLAMIST IMAGININGS AND THE UNRAVELLING OF PLURALISM

The face of radicalization in Indonesia is not merely made up of the hyper-organized political movements espousing pan-Islamic ideologies. At times it also revealed itself in the form of mob attacks energized by opportunistic local elites rather than fierce ideologues. In 2013, Setara Institute, a civil society organization monitoring Indonesia's performance in enforcing freedom of religion and belief, reported a total number of 292 acts (in 222 different incidents) that violated this fundamental right in 20 different provinces. Out of these 292 acts of violation, 175 were perpetrated by members of the community (65 acts) and locally-based social organizations, such as the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defence Front), Gabungan Ormas Islam (Joint Islamic Mass Organizations), the local chapter of the Council of Indonesian Ulema. The remaining 117 acts of violation were conducted by local police, public order officials, local government authorities and local military officers. Most of the targets of these acts were religious minority communities such as the Ahmadiyah (59 incidents), Christians (48 incidents), adherents of indigenous belief (28 incidents) and Shiites (23 incidents).⁹ Three years later, according to Setara Institute's report, the trend had not changed, with 270 acts of violation (in 208 incidents) occurring in 24 provinces, in which non-state actors perpetrated 130 acts of violation.¹⁰

By 2019, the online journal Tirto.id counted 37 houses of worship closed down by local authorities applying a joint ministerial decree¹¹ restricting construction of such buildings in the name of harmonious inter-religious relationships. The 2019 poster below, titled "Obstructing Religious Worship", illustrates the geographic spread of these closings and identifies other victims of persecution from among Indonesia's many religious minorities.¹² The violent extremist groups, such as Jamaah Islamiyah and ISIS, had no hand in these acts of aggression. These acts occurred in parallel and autonomous to the bombings by Islamist extremists, yet, they all contribute to a core narrative of Islam's hegemonic power over the Indonesian nation-state. The unravelling of pluralism in Indonesia's diverse social fabric also played itself out in the courts, as demonstrated by the drastic rise in legal suits for blasphemy. The Setara Institute documented 97 legal cases related to accusations of blasphemy between the years 1965 and 2017 when the report was published. As many as 88 of these cases were lodged after the authoritarian regime ended in 1998, most of which placed Islam as the object of blasphemous acts. According to the Setara Institute, the proceedings of 62 of these court cases involved demonstrations of mass public pressure in support of a guilty verdict. By 2017, 127 individuals had been tried or sentenced for blasphemy based on a 1965 law on blasphemy, the criminal code, and a 2018 law on electronic information and transactions.¹³ Many of these cases received high profile by the national me-

9. Setara Institute, *Stagnasi Paripurna: Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama dan Berkeyakinan di Indonesia 2013* (The Ultimate Stagnation: Condition of Freedom of Religion and Belief in Indonesia 2013). Executive Summary.

10. Setara Institute, *Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama dan Berkeyakinan 2016* (Condition of Freedom of Religion and Belief 2016).

11. The decree was signed by two ministers, i.e., the Minister of Religion and Minister of Internal Affairs, in 2006.

12. See <https://tirto.id/ada-32-gereja-ditutup-sepanjang-5-tahun-jokowi-ke-mana-dhkD>. Closing of houses of worship (2013-2018): 5 Ahmadiyah mosques and 32 churches.

13. Setara Institute, *Rezim Penodaan Agama 1965-2017: Ringkasan Eksekutif Laporan Riset Tematik Kebebasan Beragama dan Berkeya-*

dia and contributed to growing a political climate in which Islam is under siege and requires the special protection of the state.

These incidents, in communities and in the courts, are indications of a transformed Indonesian society in which intolerance was overpowering the pluralist traditions of the past. A survey conducted by Lembaga Survei Indonesia (Indonesian Survey Institute), or LSI, in 2016, established that 41.5 percent of Indonesian Muslims held intolerant views as measured by their objection against religious events and places of worship in their neighbourhood and against non-Muslims holding top elected positions in the national and local government. This trend ran in parallel with the rate of the potential for religious radicalism which stood at 8.1 percent of Indonesia's Muslims, according to the same LSI survey.¹⁴ Another survey, conducted by Alvora Research Centre in 2017, showed the trend among Indonesia's youth. Out of 1,800 university students, 23.4 percent were found to be "ready to perform jihad to establish an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia" and 19.6 per cent supported the prevailing trend in which local governments formulated regulations based on the Sharia law.¹⁵

The intersecting nature of Indonesia's diverse Islamist movements – the violent and non-violent, the political and the social – is clearly demonstrated in an incident of mass mobilization at the end of 2016, popularly called the "212 Movement" (indicating the incident's date of 2 December). Up to a 750,000-strong showing of people in white robes in the main streets of Jakarta, which has been called the largest demonstration in Indonesia's history, was the product of an alliance of Islamist movements such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, that is part of a transnational agenda to establish a global caliphate through non-violent means, and the Islamic Defence Front (FPI). Another main player in this alliance is a Salafi-inspired movement, under the leadership of Bachtiar Nasir, with these long-term objectives: a greater public role for ulama, sharia-inspired public policies, Muslim majority rule and Muslim control of the economy. They aim to transform the state and society from the bottom up along more puritan lines by shaping educational institutions, religious outreach (dakwah) groups, the media and civil society.¹⁶

kinan 2017 (Blasphemy Regime 1965–2017: Executive Summary, Thematic Research Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief 2017), 27 February 2017.

14. Mietzner and Muhtadi, Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilization in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation. *Asian Studies Review*, July 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1473335>

15. A'an Suryana, Religious Extremism in Major Campuses in Indonesia, *ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia*, Issue 6, 2022.

16. IPAC, After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia, Report No. 44, 6 April 2018.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INDONESIA'S RADICALIZATION

In communicating her views on violent extremism, one of the women interviewed for this study's empirical research, a believer in one of Indonesia's indigenous religions in her teens, was recorded as saying the following:

Intolerance is more dangerous than terrorism because acts of terrorism are more clearly defined and they are legally sanctioned by the state. On the contrary, acts of intolerance are often unconsciously conducted and, furthermore, receive justification from certain groups.¹⁷

Indeed, the Indonesian government produced a set of legal and policy instruments that constitutes a national framework to address terrorism: an anti-terrorism law (in 2003 and revised in 2018), a special force within the national police to combat terrorism called 'Detasemen 88' (2003), a national body for preventing and combating terrorism named Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme (BNPT), and a national action plan to address violent extremism (2021). According to the U.S. Government Detasemen 88 arrested more than 1,000 suspected terrorists and prosecuted more than 700, with a nearly 100 percent conviction rate between 2002 and 2015.¹⁸



Figure 1. Number of *shari'a* regulations enacted in Indonesia at the provincial or district level between 1999 and 2012, by province.

In contrast, the government supplied Islamists and political opportunists alike the legal justification to attack religious minorities through its decree restricting the construction of their houses of worship (see above). Around the country, local governments were regulating social and economic life on the basis of sharia law. Pisani and Buehler compiled a database of 422

17. Interview of Cempaka in West Java.

18. See Counter Terrorism Project, "Extremism and Terrorism in Indonesia" (2021) at <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia-extremism-and-terrorism>.

of these local regulations which were produced between the years 1999 and 2012. When they mapped out the geographic spread of these regulations, they covered almost the entire country (see below).¹⁹ They also indicate that the areas producing the most of these sharia regulations coincided with a history of Islamist movements or rebellions.

In doing their analysis, they concluded that there are pragmatic political interests behind these religious-based regulations:

[A] majority of regulations provide patronage opportunities for the benefit of special interest groups – fully 57% of the total. A further 26% are designed to appeal primarily to voters by showcasing the piety of local government, while the remaining 15% impose taxes, appealing only to the government itself.²⁰

There is also a socio-economic dimension of Indonesia's multi-faceted face of Islamist radicalism and conservatism. When Mietzner and Muhtadi conducted a comparison between survey results from 2011 and 2016 by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), they found a telling shift in the socio-economic profile among conservative and radical Muslims in Indonesia. Islamic conservatism in 2016 was not growing stronger across society as a whole, in their assessment, but was increasingly adopted and propagated by high-income Muslims with key positions in society and the economy. They saw this as signifying a shift of the epicentre of conservative-radical attitudes from the lower classes to the middle classes and elites.²¹ Using support for the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defence Front), or FPI, as a measure of conservative-radical attitude, the LSI survey indicated that, for example, among Indonesian Muslims with a tertiary degree, 18.7 percent knew and supported FPI, while only 8.2 percent of Muslims with an elementary school education (or less) did. Among professions, office employees had the highest support rates for FPI, at 22.6 percent. By contrast, only 12.2 percent of peasants and fishermen supported FPI, as did 15.5 percent of casual labourers, house maids and motorcycle taxi drivers.²² This shift aligns with the development of the Muslim middle class in Indonesia. According to economic experts, Indonesia's middle class has increased rapidly since 1999 around 25 million (25% of the population) to 146 million (57% of the population) in 2010.²³

As the Muslim middle class gained influence, Islamic consumerism also grew. In fact, the Indonesian government considers developing an "Islamic economy" to be one of its aims, as articulated in a master plan.²⁴ Rakhmani provides an illustration of the robust Islamic economy as it looked like in 2012:

19. Elizabeth Pisani and Michael Buehler, *Why do Indonesian politicians promote shari'a laws? An Analytical framework for Muslim-majority democracies*. *Third World Quarterly*, 29 July 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1206453>

20. *Ibid.*

21. Mietzner and Muhtadi, *Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilization in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation*. *Asian Studies Review*, July 2018.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Syaiful Afif, *The Rising of the Middle Class in Indonesia: Opportunity and Challenge*. Unpublished paper. University of Southern California. <https://cipe.umd.edu/conferences/DecliningMiddleClassesSpain/Papers/Afif.pdf>

24. Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning (2019). *Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024*.

[T]here are 34 Sharia banks with a network spanning all 34 provinces ... approximately 100 travel agencies licensed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to organise the umrah pilgrimage ... and 6055 companies owning 7764 halal certifications for 259,984 foods, medicines, and cosmetic products. The [Indonesian Council of Ulama] ... also issues Sharia certificates for hospitals and businesses (e-money, hotels, restaurants, online trading, direct selling, travels, etc. From the various economic sectors benefitting from Sharia financing, the most significant are trade, restaurants, and ...²⁵

For the years 2019–2024, the government plans to make Indonesia one of the world’s top producers of halal goods. Among the pillars of this economy is the Indonesian Council of Ulama which, in 2005, produced a fatwa that was used as the basis for the government’s decree effectively restricting the building of houses of worship for religious minorities in 2006 and led the way for many incidences of communal violence.

The Indonesian state is a player in identity politics, both in producing its laws and regulations as well as in developing its plans for economic growth. This reality has contributed to the persistence of Islamist ideologies, both radical and simply conservative, in the Indonesian political landscape. Understanding the interplay of radical political movements and socio-economic transformations in society is crucial for finding meaningful pathways to address extremism.

25. Inaya Rakhmani, *The Personal is Political: Gendered Morality in Indonesia’s Halal Consumerism*. TRaNS, Trans Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia, Sogang University, 2019.

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