

Reading the Myth: Public Teachings of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir

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ABSTRAK

Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, menurut media di luar Indonesia, dituduh sebagai penganjur terorisme dan revolusi melalui organisasi yang disebut Jamaah Islamiyah. Namanya sering dikaitkan dengan Al Qaidah, dan sejumlah peristiwa terorisme. Ia ditangkap karena desakan sejumlah negara atas Indonesia, melalui tuduhan sebagai aktor terorisme. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir sendiri merupakan seorang muslim taat, disiplin, tetapi juga absolutis dan simplistis. Ia memang, melalui pengajarannya, tampak berobsesi menegakkan syari'at Islam di negara Indonesia, untuk mengganti sistem kafir. Dalam hal ini, ia seorang radikal. Tetapi, sesungguhnya ia bukan penganjur terorisme dan kekerasan dalam mencapai tujuannya, sebagaimana dituduhkan media. Sikap radikalnya, sesungguhnya, tak beda dengan sikap radikal kaum Kristen fundamentalis yang pernah terjadi di barat, terutama Amerika Serikat. Selain itu, ia juga sangat menentang Amerika yang dipandang telah melakukan hegemoni dan terorisme budaya.

Government authorities from Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines and the United States began singling out an Indonesian cleric, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, in December 2001. They accused him of being the 'spiritual leader' of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), a shadowy organisation of Islamic extremists "aim[ing] to set up a pan-Islamic state in South-east Asia ... through terrorist means and revolution".¹ JI, whose institutional contours are still a matter of imaginative speculation,² was forcefully and carelessly homologised to al-Qaidah – either as its creation, extension, or alter ego – and Ba'asyir was dubbed the Osama bin Laden of Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian, US, and several European governments lectured Indonesia about the changed circumstances of the world. They urged President Megawati Sukarnoputri to take a firm stand against international terrorism by arresting Ba'asyir and outlawing JI and other Islamist groups. Their warnings were based on information gained through the intense interrogation of

mostly uncharged, untried detainees rounded up in post-September terrorist dragnets — including Omar al-Faruq, an alleged al-Qaidah operative whose testimony was leaked to Time's Romesh Ratnesar and subsequently published as the exclusive cover story of the September 23, 2002 issue, "Confessions of an Al-Qaeda Terrorist".

But Indonesian officials resisted – dallied and cringed, according to critics – claiming that there was no basis in Indonesian law to act on these requests. Unsubstantiated accusations were insufficient and Indonesia was hesitant to reenact antiterrorism or emergency terrorism laws of the sort only recently (1998) struck down after years of abuse by Soeharto's New Order regime.

Then came the horrific Kuta night-club bombing on 12 October, with its 202, mostly Western and Caucasian fatalities. Ba'asyir was instantly and shrilly fingered by those same governments as the probable Indonesian point man for the attack. An al-Qaidah link was assumed and vigorously asserted. Numerous 'experts' and commentators on

security and terrorism – few of them either Indonesians or professional Indonesianists – concurred on these claims, which loudly reverberated through the mass media.

Just two days after the explosions, for example, the American academic Zachary Abuza, author of a forthcoming book on al-Qaidah's 'tentacles of terror' in Southeast Asia, together with two US State Department insiders, were interviewed on the sober PBS news program "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer". They unanimously asserted Jemaah Islamiyah/al-Qaidah involvement. When asked about Ba'asyir's comments on the bombing, including his clearly articulated and widely published disapproval of violence as a political tool, Abuza replied, "I think he's denying this completely. I believe he's completely responsible for this attack. It is certainly within his capabilities. He has the motive to do so. And for someone who wants to create an Islamic state in the country he has to discredit the Indonesian government, Megawati's. I think he'd love to create economic chaos in the country."³ Abuza, an historian with apparent ties to US security networks and access to intelligence sources, supplied no reasons for his suspicions, no details of Ba'asyir's capabilities and motives, no explanation of why Ba'asyir would love to create economic chaos in his homeland.

Heightened pressure was placed on Indonesia to move against Ba'asyir amidst a chorus of we-told-you-so's. A different type of pressure came from within Indonesia: the government suddenly had a vested interest in discovering an external source for the Kuta atrocity. In a matter of days President Megawati issued an unpopular emergency order authorising political detentions (detention without charge on grounds of suspicion).

Ba'asyir was soon detained for questioning, despite orchestrated protests, then arrested on bombing and conspiracy charges unrelated to the Bali case. He does not accept the legal basis of his arrest and after two months still refuses to answer his interrogators. They in turn are treating him with kid gloves for fear of sparking mass protests among a populace suspicious about how free from external pressure and manipulation the investigations

can be. Police now say they have evidence linking Ba'asyir to Bali, although charges have yet to be laid pending the outcome of the first trial scheduled to begin in April 2003.

Outside Indonesia, the international media are as convinced now as in the days after the blast that Ba'asyir, Jemaah Islamiyah, and al-Qaidah are linked to the Bali bombings. The words 'alleged' and 'suspected' do not qualify assertions of Ba'asyir's putative ties to JI in most coverage. Experts on the international lecture circuit and television news broadcasts continue to expound on Ba'asyir's politics and religious teachings, though few evince evidence of having first hand access to the sermons and writings in which Ba'asyir has widely expressed his views; fewer still have the language and cultural skills required to analyse these materials, even should they be available in the CNN library.

This short note, then, is meant to do what the manufacturers of current wisdom and public opinion on Ba'asyir have not yet attempted. In it, I temporarily put aside the secret prison confessions of uncharged political detainees,⁴ the circumstantial evidence of personal and religious associations, and the fear-mongering hype of pundits in the mainstream media, and instead examine Ba'asyir's persona on the basis of what he has verifiably said and done. He is, after all, a public figure, not a cave-dwelling shadow. He has for many years been actively engaged in an open exchange on what Indonesia is and should be. What he has contributed to that discourse should not be treated as if it didn't exist.

Abu Bakar Who?

Let's begin with names, unfamiliar, hard to pronounce, suspicious-looking on their very surface, and made even more confusing by the variation that is so common – and so unconscious – in Indonesian nomenclature and spelling. There is no question that this combination of unfamiliarity and alien difference by itself can invite dismissive forms of Orientalising exoticism. Western readers do not leap to conclusions about the religion of

men called Charles Manson or Jim Jones, and do not base their understanding of the faith of hundreds of millions of Christians on the politics and crimes of such men. They do, however, tend to do just that with a name like al-Ustadz Ki Haji Abu Bakar bin Abud Baamualim Ba'asyir.

This fullest possible form of Ba'asyir's name can be parsed as follows:

Abu Bakar Ba'asyir is the root personal element in this concatenation of titles and names; (bin)Abud Baamualim is a patronymic.

'Abu Bakar' is an Arabic name as common and historically resonant in Indonesia as the Greek name 'Peter' is in Europe. It is sometimes written as two words, sometimes as one: 'Abubakar'.

'Ba'asyir' is pronounced with three syllables, the first one a sort of microsyllable barely separated from the second by the hint of a glottal stop. Its spelling has been conventionalised in Western media as the two-stroke 'Bashir' (taking the cue from Malaysian usage, perhaps); this form is rarely found in Indonesian language sources. The consonant cluster /sy/ follows the Dutch-inspired Indonesian convention and is roughly equivalent to English /sh/.⁵

Because Ba'asyir is a noted cleric and holy man, the honorific 'Ki' (sometimes *kyai*, *kyahi*, *kiyahi*, *kiyai*), is naturally added to his name by Javanese followers. The functional English equivalent might be 'Venerable' or 'Reverend' or 'Father', with the proviso that *ki* is spontaneously appended to a man's name (*ni* to a woman's); it is not awarded due to the completion of a degree or the assumption of a job.

As one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca and completed its ceremonial requirements, Ba'asyir is called 'Haji', in accordance with the well-known convention.

As a teacher in an Arab-centric paedagogical tradition, he is called *al-ustadz* (the teacher) and addressed as '*ustadz*'. The word is pronounced in Ba'asyir's circle as 'oostahd' (the final /d/ is a nonreleased dental with no hint of the with no hint of the zed). The same word may also be written *ustad*.

Among his students and followers, Ba'asyir

is called Ustad Abu with a combination of respect and affection.

Ba'asyir has also been known as Abu Samad Abud, the name he used during his Malaysian exile.

Ba'asyir was born in 1938 in the small town of Mojoagung, below Mt. Arjuna in Jombang, East Java. His father and grandfather were Hadrami immigrants, small scale merchants in the textile industry; his mother was of mixed Yemeni and Javanese extraction. His father died when he was ten years old.

From 1959-1963 Ba'asyir's older brothers supported him as a boarder at Gontor, a well-known and progressive *pesantren* school in Madiun that attracts students not just from across the archipelago, but from overseas as well. Afterwards he continued his studies at Al-Irsyad, an Islamic university in Solo, Central Java, majoring in *dakwah*, the Islamic equivalent of missionary studies or apologetics and catechisation. By the 1970s, Ba'asyir had become a teacher, radio homilist and proselyting *da'i* of local stature in Solo.

His politics began in the Islamic Masyumi party, but became progressively radicalised in the tradition of (and with some connections to) the defeated Indonesian Darul Islam movement from the 1940s-1960s.⁶ He indulged in provocative symbolic resistance to the Soeharto regime, refusing to fly the Indonesian flag or display presidential icons at the religious boarding school, Pondok Pesantren al-Mukmin (later called Ngruki when it moved to the outskirts of Solo), that he cofounded in 1971. Further, Ba'asyir considered the secularist Indonesian state to have no validity for Muslims and publicly resisted accepting the state *Pancasila* philosophy as the formal foundational principle for all social organisations, *Azas Tunggal*, as was forcefully demanded in the middle years of New Order Indonesia. His goal then, as today, was an Indonesia established on strict *shari'ah* principles in which Islam would be allowed effulgently to enlighten every aspect of state and society.

He and many of his associates consequently spent years in the archipelago's gulags, prisoners of conscience in a state that viewed political Islam

as a threat to national unity nearly on a par with the demonised Communism of Gestapu myths.

In 1985, temporarily free while his case was brought under formal review, Ba'asyir and his more politically out-spoken mentor and friend, Ngruki co-founder Abdullah Sungkar, fled to Malaysia to escape persecution and certain imprisonment. Only after Soeharto's fall and the liberalisation of Indonesian political discourse did they return home from exile, part of a tidal flow of repatriating Islamist refugees.

Back in Indonesia, Ba'asyir returned to Ngruki as teacher (despite some resistance on the part of some members of the foundation that runs the school) and *éminence grise*, helped found an Islamist NGO called the Council of Indonesian Mujahidin (Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia, MMI), and once again resumed his roles as a polemicist, preacher, and peripatetic Jeremiah with a limited but growing reputation. But in the months following September 2001 he was catapulted from relative obscurity to international notoriety by the accusations made against him and Jemaah Islamiyah in the reactive antiterror campaigns that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

After the Time article on Omar al-Faruq, print and broadcast organisations from CNN to local talkback radio turned their fears and attention to Indonesia and this bespectacled character. In the media clamour there was suddenly an unusual flurry of stations competing to conscript analysts knowledgeable about Indonesia who could offer intelligent commentary: What is JI? Who is Ba'asyir? Why did al-Qaidah do this? How did these terrorists expand into Southeast Asia? What's going on with Islam in Indonesia? And why do they hate and kill us?

Many newly conjured 'experts' were forced to scramble up a steep and rising learning curve just steps ahead of the anchors and increasingly behind the big name nabobs. Pushed and squeezed in these ways, some unwittingly cannibalised one another's (already borrowed) ideas in a frenzy of mutually uncited paraphrasing, presenting a veritable *tableau écrivain* of Brueghel's 'Parable of

the Blind'.

Order was brought to a chaos of unfamiliar facts by applying simple, powerful, ubiquitously emergent archetypes, or framing notions, about 'fundamentalist Islam', al-Qaidah networks and cells, 'conflict of civilisations', and so forth. Frights of nature, like spiders ('web of terror') and octopodes ('tentacles of terror'), leapt from the Discovery Channel and World Wide Web into the Real Live World and the domestic living room overnight. The same archetypes had been deployed to understand the September 11th attacks on the US – to map a world in which such violence, malevolent and mad, could be perpetrated upon America, noble and innocent, and its heroic, hardworking citizens. Now they appeared to offer ready explanations with which to understand this newer tragedy.

One idea that emerged and persisted amid the rising welter of strange names and diabolical organisations – Ba'asyir, al-Faruq, Riduan Asamuddin, Fathur Rahman al-Gozi, JI, KMM, MILF, ASG – was a new formulation: the notion that a redrawing of national boundaries was a central tenet of radical Southeast Asian Islamists. "The plan is breathtaking – to create one Islamic state from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore to parts of the Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar," according to CNN's Maria Ressa in one version of this idea. And Ba'asyir was said to campaign 'openly' for this Islamic super state in Indonesia.⁷ Philippines National Security Adviser Roilo Golez claimed his intelligence sources indicated that even parts of northern Australia were included in JI's vision for this theocratic future state, Daulah Islam Nusantara.⁸

Ba'asyir's Public Profile

After interviews with Ba'asyir, his associates at Ngruki, members of MMI, and others in November and December 2002,⁹ and based on writings by and about Ba'asyir as well as five hours of recorded sermons in an underground series called "Understanding Key Concepts in the Teachings of the Islamic Faith",¹⁰ I have not yet encountered

any substantiable 'terrorist' elements in Ba'asyir's life, work, or message. Nor have I found any indications that he preaches the overthrow of Indonesia and its replacement with a pan-Southeast Asian Islamic super state. Nor does he publicly advocate political violence or the forced conversion of non-Muslims. In fact he openly denounces these extremist, 'un-Islamic' positions.

The recordings are available in audio cassette and video CD form from the producers, Ulil Albab Group, run out of a small *warung* at Jl. Bogowonto 74 in Pasar Kliwon, Solo. I call them 'underground' because they are not commercially available. It took me three days to track them down from first rumour to final suspicious interrogation as a possible CIA operative in Pasar Kliwon.

The *Understanding Islam* lecture series mentioned above, together with an article by Ba'asyir in the proceedings of the first MMI conference,¹¹ are the only significant documentary material about Ba'asyir in the public domain. The overview of Ba'asyir's main beliefs which they present can be summed up quickly, if crudely, as follows.

- (1) Islam possesses exclusive veracity and authority.
- (2) The faithful, *para mu'min*, must strive to keep God and religion (*dienul Islam*) at the centre of every aspect of life.
- (3) God loves best and tests most severely his righteous followers; he also jealously reserves for them true happiness and eternal rewards in the life to come.
- (4) The profane world is an abomination to God; indeed, he only acknowledges the prayers and good works of Muslims who adhere strictly to the strictures and demands of *dienul Islam*.
- (5) Everything that is founded on *shari'ah*, the path of Allah as revealed in the Qur'an and the body of *sunnah*, is uplifting in nature and brings blessings.
- (6) By contrast, all that is based on other principles – explicitly including democracy, socialism, *Pancasila*, capitalism, other religions, and 'Islam' as practiced by the majority of the Muslim community – is *kafir*, degrading, and

ultimately destructive.

- (7) It is a nonnegotiable proposition that Muslims must live their religion completely and with sincerity. If they do not, they are not among the believers. If they do, they can not in good conscience accept the political or social dominance of a system that is not *shari'ah* based.

Ba'asyir speaks regularly and in blanket terms of the moral bankruptcy of the Indonesian state. He also emphasises the obligation of all Muslims to support the *shari'ah*-fication of the constitution, legal system, banking system, and every other aspect of the polity. Christians and others are tolerated but not embraced. They would have their place as protected, and restricted, minorities in his ideal state, as outlined in the *shari'ah*, but the faithful should not seek to mingle with them.

No Muslim may acquiesce to governance by non-Muslims or (virtually the same thing) bad Muslims. Ba'asyir does not appear to offer practical advice on the logistics and strategies of replacing the *Pancasila* state with a *shari'ah* state. By example, though, through his associations with MMI, Ngruki, and a number of other Surakarta-based organisations, the public record shows him to support rhetorical engagement with the state and street-level political activism in the form of demonstrations, rallies, protests, open letters and formal petitions to authorities. He also actively sponsors civil litigation, and calls for criminal investigations, through a team of supporting lawyers based in Jakarta.

Ba'asyir's absolutist religious prejudices do not stop with the theoretical rejection of the secular state. He carries his political analysis further, far into the realm of conspiracy theory in which international and Indonesian Christianity, together with a cartoonishly-drawn cabal of undifferentiated Jews/Zionists/Israelis/Mossad, combine to divide, corrupt, and undermine Muslims – as individuals, as the *ummah Islamiyah*, and as the disconnected roll of would-be Islamic nations.

Ba'asyir's anti-Jewish sentiments are particularly deep and personal. He refers to them constantly. All of his thinking about great power politics is thoroughly infiltrated with the distorted facts

and bogus theories about world domination and secret conspiracies that also thrive in the racist back lots of the West – and with surprising virulence on the Internet. A similarly deep vein of anti-Semitism is found in the ideas of other leading members of MMI, particularly its functional chief, Irfan Awwas.¹² In this view, the US either perpetrated or allowed 9-11 to happen; the American government was also the Machiavellian sponsor of the Bali bombings.

It must be noted for readers unfamiliar with the Indonesian context that these are not entirely outlandish, and certainly not politically incorrect ideas: major government figures, and important news outlets, have from time to time leant their weight and stature to similar readings of the Bush administration's 'War on Terror'. At the same time, racial stereotypes and racist patterns of thought and expression are public and commonplace in Indonesia. Essentialist thinking about nations and peoples is regularly uttered and rarely questioned, even in academic and government settings.

With the exception of his ideas of Islamic moral and civilisational superiority and racially tainted theories of international politics, the preponderance of Ba'asyir's teachings are eminently moral: prayer, discipline, simplicity, poverty, responsibility, cleanliness, honesty, hard work, dedication, good parenting, good citizenship. Revision of Indonesia's constitution so that it incorporates *shari'ah* is necessary to enable these virtues to be publicly and universally inculcated. For Ba'asyir, the current environment is far too permissive in general, and fatally flawed by its establishment on *kafir* principles, including popular democracy, a usurious banking system, social equality of the sexes, and licensing of immoral (and culturally unacceptable) behaviour for economic gain. But Ba'asyir does not himself publicly advocate violence against the perceived ungodliness of the political system. Nor does he preach the forcing of *shari'ah* on a resistant majority. But he does take the position that to be Muslim is to insist on Islamic government, Islamic laws, Islamic society. By extension, disagreement with these ideas on the part of a Muslim is a form of apostasy

– a position that in literalist *shari'ah* terms could be used to justify severe action.

Ba'asyir also believes in the desirability, the necessity, even the inevitability, of a world caliphate uniting all Muslim nations under a single, righteous exemplar and ruler. This does not necessitate the dissolution of existing states into an overarching super state, but does envision a moral unity and a shared vision. There is a problem in the abstract for Muslims who live in non-Islamic states and are required to submit to *kafir* authority. Malaysian and Indonesian Islamists of Ba'asyir's stripe therefore do give thought to the fate of their coreligionists in Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines; farther afield they are also concerned for the Muslims of India, China, Europe, and North America. But it must be emphasised that despite endlessly repeated media claims to the contrary, Ba'asyir does not speak in formal or concrete terms about the establishment of a Daulah Islam Nusantara, or Southeast Asian Emirate: this political configuration is no more than a gossamer ideal whose formation neither he nor his MMI confederates seriously espouse or actively promote.¹³ For them, it is Indonesia first and foremost that needs Islamic purification, and it is towards this end that Ba'asyir continues to preach.

Domesticating/Deorientalising Ba'asyir

As absolutist, exclusionist, and racist as some aspects of Ba'asyir's teachings are, it must be emphasised that similar ideas are also found in Western political and religious discourse, particularly American. In other clothes, Ba'asyir would be eminently familiar to many Western observers that now recoil at the very idea of the man and his faith. Christian fundamentalism articulates nearly identical moral platforms to the Qur'anic and *sunnah*-based positions of Ba'asyir, but derives them from the Bible and adheres to them, *mutatis mutandis*, with a similar sense of exclusive truth and special relationship to divinity. In the US – despite social processes that have largely relo-

cated religion to the purely personal realm – longing for a righteous, God-fearing state is almost universal in the Christian community. Evangelical groups, both in their sophisticated theological thinking and in the rich texts of their folkways and legends, consider the United States and its founding fathers to have been divinely inspired. The quintessentially American faith of Mormonism goes farther, rewriting the history of Judaism and Christianity in such a way that both are mapped onto Columbia – from Adam to the Babylonian captivity to the postmortal (and more successful) ministry of Jesus – and the corrupt Old World religions are transcended by the corrective revelations to the unschooled New World prophet, Joseph Smith.

In contemporary America, extremism articulated in Christian terms regularly erupts as fundamentalist radicalism that destroys family planning clinics (or murder the clinicians), undermines state authority in armed confrontations with the centurions of secularism, and occasionally exacts bloody vengeance – as in Oklahoma – for the wrong-minded, ‘anti-God’ actions of the secular government. These are political phenomena that occur in the United States; they do not define either Christianity or American society. Similarly, extremism articulated in Islamic terms occurs in Indonesia. Its weak legal infrastructure and politically weak centre mean that these forms of political violence are increasingly common. But neither Indonesian Islam nor Indonesian society are defined by such actions.

Beyond such general parallels, it is useful to deorientalise Ba’asyir personally, domesticate him, translate him into more familiar terms. In many respects, he may be seen as a rough ideological equivalent to Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson in the United States, though Ba’asyir does not have the media profile, personal fortune, access to executive and legislative power – or the indulgent lifestyles and corpulence – of these counterparts. He is situated much further from the centre of political activity than American Fundamentalist leaders; indeed he is far out on the furthest fringes of the public arena, despite support in principle from

figures as high up as Hamzah Haz, the moderate Islamist who serves as Megawati’s vicepresident.

Even Ba’asyir’s views on race are not as dramatically alien to Christian Fundamentalism as might first appear to be the case. His anti-Semitism can be more starkly and publicly formulated, due to the general Indonesian acceptance of racism as an unremarkable and unmarked value – but this was also common in the United States as recently as the 1960s, and has reappeared today in the form of rabidly anti-Islamic sentiments.

Continuing the comparison, the Christian right in America today, with Mr Bush leading the way, view the world through a Biblically-tinted lens, looking upon war and organised violence in the service of righteous ends as undesirable, but ultimately necessary, given the nature of the world, the threat of (Islamic) terrorism, the uncontrollability of (Islamic) rogue states. America’s special place in the world, its interests abroad, and its ability selflessly to serve humanity must all be protected. America’s prophesied role in the violent introit to the millennial reign is also a sobering reality in the minds of many Americans, not least the current resident of the White House.

Ba’asyir, for his part, is a fervent proponent of personal *jihad* (the only choice in a non-*shari’ah* state like Indonesia), including its manifestations in the political realm. *Jihad* is required of all faithful Muslims as a fundamental article of faith. But *jihad* here emphatically does not mean ‘holy war’, as is so regularly and wilfully misrepresented in the West. In interconfessional and political terms, *jihad* (‘dedicated effort’) is interpreted to mean active defence of Islam wherever and whenever it is threatened. When a threat to Islam, or a particular Muslim community, takes the form of propaganda or misinformation, *jihad* requires a proportionate response in kind – education and dissemination through comparable media of the Truth undermined by anti-Islamic lies.

When the threat is violent and results in the destruction of life and property, a proportionate and equitable *jihadi* response can justifiably take the same form.¹⁴ For this reason Ba’asyir has been a supporter of what he considers reactive, self-

defensive force over the past several years in Maluku and Poso. For this reason, too, the actions of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaidah around the world can be seen as appropriate and proportionate responses to the long-unanswered violence of the United States against the entire Islamic world – though in fact Ba'asyir considers 9-11 to have been an American conspiracy and deception and not the work of bin Laden.

There is nothing about these views that is contrary to law and little that is exclusively Islamist. Many around the world with no interest in political Islam (or even a positive abhorrence of it) feel that the events of 9-11 were an appropriate and overdue slap in the face to American hegemonism, however regrettable the loss of civilian life. But Ba'asyir does not issue calls for political violence of this sort himself and clearly restricts his public role to that of a teacher of right living and legally sanctioned (or tolerated) political activism, not a sponsor of anarchy. How others interpret and construe his teachings, or to what extent his words might be zealously read as Straussian texts, is not the issue here.

Ba'asyir is personally a man of simplicity, religious devotion, abstinence, and discipline. His politics, in their particularities, are naïve, other worldly and only selectively informed. He is devoid of critical, comparative knowledge of world history. He is deeply rooted in a tradition that nourishes anti-Jewish sentiment – as well as other forms of ethnic and religious prejudice – and he in turn has come to embrace conspiratorial forms of anti-Semitism. In short, there is little about Ba'asyir's politics that can be praised, and much that is troublesome.

But despite his shortcomings, Ba'asyir may nevertheless be seen, quixotically, as an admirable figure in his context. His message challenges the assumptions of American and Western domination (which he calls cultural terrorism) and offers an alternative view of modernity that is fully in tune with international currents. A healthy Indonesian democracy worthy of the name must protect such views, however unpopular with foreign governments, however outside the mainstream of

majoritarian domestic politics, however out of harmony with the generally liberal and secular opinions that characterise Indonesia today. Anything less would be a step backwards towards the repressive policies and Muslim-muzzling of the Suharto years. For their part, too many Western commentators have presumed to understand and comment on Ba'asyir based on borrowed concepts and simplistic archetypes. They have ignored or excluded mounds of readily available primary information while eagerly, uncritically, and repetitively embracing unverifiable reports and secret confessions, descriptions of which (though not the original documentation) have been vouchsafed to select individuals with contacts in the intelligence community. By failing honestly to interrogate Ba'asyir's record and writings, they have effectively muzzled him, prevented his potentially exculpatory words from illuminating the media-spun images. Ba'asyir may be guilty or innocent. The public record of his preaching may or may not represent the full range of his political behaviour. But as long as a denatured icon cribbed from the Osama bogeyman is uncritically promoted in his place, the Ba'asyir of the media will remain an obfuscatory myth that can serve political agendas but not the public need for a balanced report of facts. **■**

Endnotes:

*A truncated version of this article appeared in *Inside Indonesia* 74 (April-June 2003), pp. 9-10. Travel funding that made a quick trip to Indonesia after the Bali bombings possible was provided by The University of Auckland Research Committee, to whom I am grateful. I would also like to thank Ustad Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, Ustad Farid Ma'ruf, teachers and students at Pondok Pesantren Islam Al-Mukmin, and many others who helped make a short trip in a new landscape surprisingly fruitful for me.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, MFA "Press Statement on the Request for Addition of Jemaah Islamiah to List of Terrorists Maintained by the UN", 23 October 2002, as quoted in Sidney Jones, "Indonesia Backgrounder: How the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network operates", International Crisis Group, Jakarta and Brussels, 11 December 2002, p.5

² Ba'asyir has been repeatedly quoted as saying that jemaah

islamiyah (the Islamic community) is a concept, not an organisation. See for example "Jemaah Islamiyah, Ideas and Idealism", *Tempo Magazine*, 5-11 November 2002. http://www.cdi.levillage.org/article.php?id_article=60

³ "Terror in Paradise." A News Hour with Jim Lehrer transcript. October 14, 2002. Interview with Robert Gelbard, Zachary Abuza, and Michael Sheehan. Online News Hour. Online Focus. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/july-dec02/bali_10-14.html. Look also at <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s711740.htm> for an excerpt from Abuza's forthcoming book, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Networks of Global Terrorism* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, due out October 2003). A more extensive, but rougher version of this text can be viewed at <http://www.apcss.org/College/SEC2002-2/Tentacles.rtf>.

⁴ Newspapers in Indonesia and elsewhere reported today (25-02-2003) that one of the small number of admitted Bali bombers who had implicated Ba'asyir under interrogation is now recanting, claiming that he had been forced to provide the Ba'asyir link. He is Ali Imron, one of the technical experts who helped assemble the bombs. See list link for AFP story as reported in the Sydney Morning Herald: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/02/25/1046064035334.html>.

⁵ The way that news flows around the world is evident in the Dutch media's tendency to use the Anglicised spelling 'Bashir' rather than than Indo-Dutch 'Basyir' or 'Ba'asyir'

⁶ On Ba'asyir's connections to members of Darul Islam and other Islamist political movements, see especially

Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia: The case of the 'Ngruki Network' in Indonesia, an August 2002 report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (available at the ICG website, <http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=733>).

⁷ Story filed August 30, 2002, <http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/07/30/seasia.state/>

⁸ See for example <http://www.abc.net.au/am/s712255.htm>

⁹ For details on this trip, see my "Meeting Ustadz Abu", online at <http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/asia/behrend/meetabb.pdf>.

¹⁰ Memahami pokok-pokok ajaran dienul Islam (bersama: Al Ustadz KH. Abubakar Ba'asyir).

¹¹ Ust. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, "Sistem kaderisasi mujahidin dalam mewujudkan masyarakat Islam." In Irfan Suryahadi Awwas, ed., *Risalah Kongres Mujahidin dan penegakan syari'ah Islam*, pp. 79-90. Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 2001.

¹² On anti-Semitism in Indonesian Islam, see Martin van Bruinessen, "Yahudi sebagai simbol dalam wacana Islam Indonesia masa kini," at http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/yahudi_sebagai_simbol.htm#_ftn1.

¹³ For an introduction to these matters, see the 500 pages of discussion on the universal imamate and matters of shari'ah government, nationhood, and statehood in Irfan Suryahadi Awwas, ed., *Risalah Kongres Mujahidin dan penegakan syari'ah Islam*. Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 2001.

¹⁴ This particular explanation of jihad was provided by Irfan Awwas in the Yogyakarta offices of the MMI.

