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**Losing the Democratic Moment?
Southeast Asia and the War on Terror**

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INTRODUCTION

Casting a cursory glance across Southeast Asia, recent events seem to confirm that with a few obvious exceptions, much of the region is consolidating recent democratic advances. Indeed, four of the five original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand – are continuing to enjoy the fruits of what is sometimes referred to as ‘the Third Wave of Democratization’ (Huntington 1993). Even so, learned commentators brave enough to state categorically that the authoritarian corporatism that defined the region for much of the past two decades is dead and buried are still hard to find.

It is true, as recent Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and indigenous human rights groups have pointed out, human rights abuses continue to be a problem in all countries in the region. In Indonesia, elements of the military continue to commit atrocities in Aceh and West Papua and assist sectarian militias in places such as Kalimantan and Maluku (see *Amnesty International* 2004a). In Malaysia, reports of systemic intimidation of students, journalists and human rights workers continue. Furthermore reports of the arbitrary killing and torture of suspected criminals by Special Branch, Malaysia’s domestic intelligence service, as well as the on-going use of the Internal Security Act to jail without charge alleged militants and terrorists – suggest that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi’s attempts to purge Malaysian politics of the excesses of the Mahathir era are still at a formative stage. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether Badawi can wean the Malaysian state from an obsessive dependence on the intimidation of dissenting voices developed during Mahathir’s long tenure (*Amnesty International* 2004a; see also *Human Rights Watch* 2004a). In the Philippines, corruption and abuse within the armed forces and national police – including suspected involvement by the later in kidnapping-for-ransom syndicates – remains a major problem. So too do links between the security services and certain powerful families, connections that help the later distort local elections and intimidate those who might stand in the way of the commercial or political ambitions (*Amnesty International* 2004a). Meanwhile, in Thailand, Prime Minister Thaksin’s increasing impatience with journalistic inquiries into his alleged mixing of business and politics is seeing the erosion of media freedoms (*Human rights Watch* 2004b), while in the South of the country the clumsy brutality of Thai security forces appears to have helped revitalize a long dormant Muslim separatist movement.

But these problems notwithstanding, human rights are increasingly respected, accountability and transparency in government better guaranteed, and media freedoms more entrenched in much of the Southeast Asian region, especially when compared to the excesses of the 1980s and much of the 1990s. For example, Abdullah Badawi's ascension to the Prime Ministership and presidency of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has corresponded with the launch of an anti-graft campaign targeting senior party officials and businesspeople previously favoured by the former Mahathir administration. And in a dramatic fashion, we have also seen the Malaysian High Court squash the patently absurd sodomy conviction of former deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. While convictions on corruption charges continue to stand and impede Anwar's return to politics, his release from prison is a clear indication that the courts are again beginning to exercise their independence without the fear of retaliation from the executive. Further afield; in an astonishing logistical exercise almost 150 million Indonesians cast their votes in the first direct election of a President. Moreover, the election of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono marks the third peaceful change of administration since the fall of Suharto. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, despite the now predictable levels of electoral violence associated with vested interest politics in what Benedict Anderson has called a '*cacique* democracy' (Anderson 1988), the May polls have been assessed by both independent Philippine watchdog agencies and international observers as a fair expression of support for the return of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as President. Following the 2000 impeachment of former President Estrada, the re-election of Arroyo offers support for the argument that civil society is slowly taking root in the Philippines despite strong rear-guard actions by vested family and regional interests.

Nevertheless, there is little room for complacency. Indeed, there is growing evidence that recalcitrant authoritarian forces remain eager to roll back many of the civil society and human rights initiatives introduced across the region (albeit unevenly) throughout the 1990s.

To this end, the sudden emergence of terrorism as a key domestic and international issue provides these recalcitrants with a useful foil. Under the camouflage of 'fighting terror', defenders of the old authoritarian order have begun to reassert themselves. In Indonesia calls for a return to a more assertive role for the military in politics, along with the parallel calls for the introduction of an equivalent to Malaysia and Singapore's Internal Security Acts (ISA) are increasingly common. Also under the guise of combating terror, regional elements of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) have adopted a more aggressive approach to insurgencies in Aceh and West Papua, with civilians bearing the brunt of much of the violence (*Amnesty*

International 2004b). In Malaysia, the argument that the country faces an immediate terrorist threat has effectively derailed the movement for an end to the ISA, and the number of alleged terrorists or terrorist sympathizers detained under the Act is now hovering at around 80. In the Philippines, support from the US in the fight against separatist insurgents in the South have emboldened the military and rendered peace talks – pursued intermittently since 1996 – as an increasingly fragile prospect (*Amnesty International* 2004c). And in Thailand, the revival of separatist activities in the south has played into Thaksin's hands by fostering a sense of immanent uncertainty, a mood which he continues to manipulate to his advantage (*Human Rights Watch* 2004c; see also Charoenpo 2004).

However, while curtailing rights and rolling back civil society might temporarily complicate the activities of terrorist networks in the region, in the longer term this strategy carries a significant degree of risk. Indeed, unless it is rescued from the obfuscating tactics of autocratic elites, the War on Terror risks escalating violence in troubled parts of Southeast Asia and in so doing initiate a reactive shrinking of the public sphere. Indeed, we would do well to heed the eminent historian Gabriel Kolko's observation that all modern wars began with the men who initiated them conflating their own personal interests with those of the nation as a whole (Kolko 2002).

It is unfair and inaccurate, however, to point the finger just at Southeast Asia. Indeed, the hijacking of the existential fear caused by recent terrorist outrages by conservative forces to pare back civil liberties is also a feature of much of the Western world (see Bigo 2002; Cole 2003; Heymann 2003; in Australia see also Hocking 2004). While a detailed examination of these wider dynamics is beyond the scope of this particular study, it suffices to say that it is becoming increasingly clear that the view that prevails in Canberra, London and Washington - that there is an unavoidable trade off between security and freedom – has also taken root in some Southeast Asian policy circles. And as in the West, the appeal of this equation is rooted more in political expediency than in any pragmatic analysis of the nature of contemporary terrorism or the sorts of measures that are likely to contribute to a successful management strategy.

Contrary to prevailing counter-terrorism wisdom, liberty and security are not antonyms – nor are they mutually exclusive. Terrorism is not a malaise that can be purged from the body politic by a more disciplined regimen of social behaviour. Terrorism is a tactic that appeals to individuals only after a prolonged period of alienation, marginalisation and brutalisation. It is the manner in which these characteristics collide with different psychological impulses which

generates in some individuals the urge to murder for a political cause. It is variations in these psychological impulses that appear to explain why it is that some individuals exposed to what the Norwegian peace theorist Johan Galtung (1990) called 'structural violence' do not embrace terrorism while others do. In this sense there are a variety of different psychological insights that might explain the behaviour of individual terrorists – Jung's notion of the archetype, and Freud's notion of the narcissism of minor difference are just two.¹

From a human rights perspective, it is important to note that a consistent feature that connects terrorists of varying political motives and personality types is the existence of near universal feelings of anger, disempowerment, and frustration. Moreover, to the extent that the denial of human rights robs individuals of their dignity it constitutes a form of structural violence which threatens to intensify these feelings. It is for this reason that authoritarian systems tend to produce more terrorists than democratic systems.

Before teasing this out more fully, it is first necessary to take stock of the extent of the terrorist problem in Southeast Asia. This is a worthy diversion for a number of reasons, not the least being that detailed studies examining the extent of the spread of terrorist networks in Southeast Asia suggest that the panicked reactions of some are an over-exaggeration.

SOUTHEAST ASIA AS TERRORISM'S 'SECOND FRONT'

In our own region, while events in the United States on 11 September 2001 certainly had an impact on security thinking, it was the events in Bali some thirteen months later that shattered the illusion comfortably held in some quarters that mass casualty terrorism was a phenomenon from which East and Southeast Asia was largely immune. Even the detection in December 2001 of a plot by the hitherto little known *Jemaah Islamiyah* to use truck bombs to attack both local and Western targets in Singapore had only limited influence on regional political dynamics. With the exception of the government of Singapore, who viewed the episode as a confirmation of the danger posed to its own security by Islamic militancy in the Malay world more generally, there was a widespread view that the *Jemaah Islamiyah* was an aberration unlikely to survive the blow delivered by the quick arrest of 13 of its key operatives in Singapore, followed by another 18 soon after.

However, this perception was short lived. In the months leading up to the attacks in Bali on 12 October 2002 a stream of intelligence leaks and corresponding media reports began to paint the picture of a group that was simultaneously a more cohesive and deadly manifestation

of anger deeply rooted in small segments of the wider Islamic community. In particular, a series of investigative breakthroughs in mid-2002 pointed to Jemaah Islamiyah's role in a series of deadly bombing attacks against Christian churches across Java during Christmas 2000, and against the Manila mass transit system several days later. With these breakthroughs it soon became clear that JI was both more developed and more widespread than hitherto imagined. Indeed, for Rohan Gunaratna (2002) and several other observers of international terrorism, and for several regional intelligence services, Southeast Asia deserved the epithet the 'second front' in al Qaeda's campaign against apostates and the West.

This view, which has been critiqued elsewhere as founded upon an inaccurate understanding of the true nature of the al Qaeda - Jemaah Islamiyah nexus and an exaggeration of the extent of the terrorist threat in the region, nevertheless emerged quickly in many Western intelligence and media communities as a new orthodoxy.² In many respects it is also a new archetype – a polar opposite to the earlier orthodoxy of Southeast Asian Islam as a unique belief system permanently immune to the radicalizing effects of fundamentalist teachings emanating from the Middle East and South Asia. Against this benign view of Southeast Asian Islam as a pristine outpost of gentle *Sufism*, the new orthodoxy posits Southeast Asian Islam as little more than a transplanted version of the type of militant Wahabbism that inspires the likes of Usama bin Laden and many of his followers. Much of the recent scholarship has therefore shifted from a preoccupation with the cataloguing of the unique differences that characterize Southeast Asian Islam to a search for points of similarity between Islam as practiced in the region and in militant circles in the Middle East and South Asia.

It is not the purpose of this paper to focus on this new orthodoxy or on the public and academic drivers that have confirmed its axiomatic status. But acknowledging this phenomenon provides a useful springboard into the more overtly political forces that have perpetuated the myth. Especially interesting is the extent to which opinion shapers appear to have been assisted in their research by Southeast Asian security and intelligence agencies. Indeed, somewhere around 40% of references in Chapter 4 in Gunaratna's *Inside al Qaeda* – the chapter where he outlines his case for Southeast Asia being considered al Qaeda's Second Front – are from anonymous or unverifiable regional intelligence services or highly partisan and often state-controlled local media sources. In Abuza's book, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (2003), more than 25% of references in Chapter 4 – 'Jemaah Islamiyah and al Qaeda's Expanding Network' - are sourced to either anonymous regional

intelligence contacts, government controlled news outlets like the *Straits Times* or *New Straits Times*, or to Gunaratna.

Leaving aside the scholarly concerns that arise in any circumstance where there is such a heavy reliance on unverifiable sources, it is indeed curious that a handful of scholars and journalists appear to enjoy such a high level of official access to highly sensitive intelligence material. Indeed, there appears to have emerged a circular information flow that begins with selective leaks of information to certain journalists and researchers ('experts'), whose commentary enters the public realm as 'fact', and which is then picked up on by the agencies and departments who initiated the process and used as 'independent' confirmation of a worst-case scenario – that Southeast Asia is indeed a hotbed of violent Islamist activism.

It is this perception – that terrorists and terrorism pose a serious threat to the political and economic well being of Southeast Asia – which provides the main justification for a series of initiatives that have in some cases slowed the move to more democratic governance in many parts of the region. This cycle of disinformation works to the advantage of conservative elements in that it feeds a sense of existential community panic that in turn renders individuals amenable to a rolling back of civil liberties in the name of personal security.

MISDIAGNOSING THE 'THREAT'

In their haste to identify 'terrorists', too many researchers and policy makers appear to have lost sight of a crucial distinction between different forms of political agitation. The term 'terrorist', rich in political implications, is used in a random manner without much apparent regard for the social consequences of such a use of language.³

In attempting to offer a more nuanced account of Islamic politics in the Middle East, Najib Ghabbian (2002) draws a distinction between moderate and extremist groups that is also applicable to the Southeast Asian scene. He defines moderate movements as those that pursue change through 'gradual and peaceful means', whereas extremists are those 'ready to use all means necessary to implement their vision of Islam (Ghabbian 2002)'. While it might seem an obvious distinction, Ghabbian is right when he suggests that it is one that is too often ignored. This is especially so in the post-September 11 environment when in their panic to round up as many 'terrorists' as possible, Western governments have accepted at face value claims by regional governments that their attempts to reassert the integrity of the post-colonial imaginary constitutes an exercise in counter-terrorism. Hence, under the pretext of counter-

terrorism, elements of the Indonesian armed forces have set about destroying a fragile cease-fire in the province of Aceh; Kuala Lumpur continues to hold without charge or trial over sixty alleged 'extremists'; Singapore has moved to further increase surveillance and intimidation of any member of the minority Malay population whose views depart from those expounded by the ruling People's Action Party; and Manila has deliberately escalated tensions with Muslim and Communist insurgents at a time when workable peace talks seemed a distinct possibility.

The significance of this problem should not be underestimated. Under conditions of global modernity the correlation between political space, existential anger, and violence has become tragically clearer, and it is in this sense that assaults on civil and political freedoms, under the guise of enhancing public security, threaten to spread rather than attenuate terrorist violence. Of course, this prognosis holds equally for Southeast Asia as well as other parts of the world.

In order to better understand the dangerous consequences that might flow from misrepresenting the extent of the terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, and thereby fostering a counter-terrorism response that rests on an excessive reliance on the suspension of rights and an over-reliance on force, a productive first step is to conceive of acts of terrorism as the end product of a socio-psychological process that involves the incremental embitterment and alienation of the subject. Such a dynamic conception of terrorism rests upon the empirically obvious notion that unless born with a medically diagnosable orientation to violence, nobody is born a terrorist (see Sprinzak 1995; Sprinzak et al 2003; Robins and Post 1997). As a tentative and undeniably flawed first step towards building an understanding of what might be called 'a transformative politics of violence', I have argued elsewhere that the incidence of political violence in Southeast Asia might be profitably understood through a three part typology of oppositional political groups, which for want of better terms I have described as activist, militant and terrorist (Wright-Neville 2004).

There is no need to repeat the analysis that underpins this typology here, suffice to say that a deeper understanding of the forces that might drive an individual from political activism (defined as oppositional politics undertaken within existing legal parameters), to militancy (small scale transgressions of legal norms that sometimes involve acts of calibrated violence), and finally to terrorism (the systematic use or threatened use of violence to achieve a political end) are simultaneously sociological, political and psychological in character.

The complexity of terrorism as both an act of individual human agency and at the same time a social phenomenon means that explanations grounded in just one analytical tradition – mainstream sociology with its strong pedigree in the works of writers such as Durkheim and Simmel (especially the concepts of alienation and anomie), political science with its roots in structural determinism bequeathed by Marx and latter day functionalists like Parsons, or the nomological traditions of conventional psychology – are unlikely to yield anything more than overly generalized models of terrorist behaviour. Against this, what is needed is a cross-disciplinary critical understanding of the myriad forces that impact differently on a variety of actors in Southeast Asia. That is, for example, an approach that avoids conflating anti-secularism with anti-Westernism, Islamism with terrorism, and that understands that sympathy for the issues that terrorists sometimes claim to espouse does not make one a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer. This latter objective is especially important, especially in the context of counter-terrorism. To the extent that a great deal of scholarly and journalistic analysis of terrorism in Southeast Asia has failed to account for these nuanced differences, it has played an implicit role in justifying broad-based assaults against the civil liberties of groups whose only sin is to have raised questions about the utility of Western-style secular government, the morality of Washington's unfettered support for Israel's approach to the Palestinian issue, or a range of other policy positions which are now garrisoned behind the nonsensical conservative notion of 'our way of life'.

GLOBALIZATION AND COMMUNITIES OF SUPPORT

Quite apart from the obvious consequences of this approach in terms of the rights and dignity of ordinary people in Southeast Asia, approaches to counter-terrorism that are predicated on crude stereo-types of oppositional politics are dangerous from another perspective. To the extent that terrorism is a political strategy employed by a minority of disenfranchised, its survival requires the material and spiritual succor provided by a wider community of support. The shrinking of civil society and abrogation of the rights of the majority to combat the evil of a few risks feeding this community of support, especially if the alleged threat as described in this case by Washington and its principle regional allies in the War on Terror (especially Canberra, Bangkok, Manila and Singapore) does not resonate with ordinary citizens.

Indeed, to the extent that such restrictions feed an individual's sense of being restrained by the status quo from announcing their grievances and achieving their full potential, there is

a risk that restrictions on civil society will intensify the structural violence that generates the existential angst upon which terrorism feeds. When applied to the religious and cultural realms – which have attracted much of the increased scrutiny by panicked security personnel – counter-terrorism is a policy position that reinforces the wider global trend referred to by Nancy Fraser (2001) as the shift from ‘economic harms’ to ‘cultural harms’.

Fraser’s idea is useful for many reasons, not the least of which is that it also points to the spread of networks of individuals who believe they are victims of this cultural harm. For example, the insurgency in the Southern Philippines (spearheaded since the mid-1990s by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front along with a range of smaller groups), the resistance movement in the Indonesian province of Aceh led by the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM – Free Aceh Movement), and similar groups involved in the simmering insurgency in southern Thailand, and different parts of Myanmar, are all cases in point. The roots of each of these conflicts lie in structural violence perpetrated in the name of nation building. Each began as protest movements opposed to the cultural and physical marginalisation of minority cultures and points of view. Over time each evolved a violent edge in response to a number of interconnected factors, the most common of which was frustration with their inability to secure positive gestures towards their grievances from the state. And more recently, each appears to have developed an even more violent edge that has emerged out of a recontextualization of historical grievances within a contemporary milieu.

In each of these conflicts existing cultural and political grievances are being reworked within the context of globalization, and there is a corresponding tendency by many of the alienated and angry to now conceive of the intractability of their grievances as rooted in a system where ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ no longer have any meaning. Or looked at slightly differently, there is a growing tendency to view the US in particular, but the West more generally, as accessories to their subjugation, especially in light of the vocal support offered by the US and its principle allies for ‘tough’ but poorly directed counter-terrorism policies.

Despite considerable differences in scriptural interpretation and political strategies, this common anti-Western thread is binding activists, militants and terrorists. There is a shared sense that the overwhelmingly secular and capitalist orientation of the postcolonial Southeast Asian state is responsible for inflicting significant cultural damage on communities across the region. This common perspective provides the basis for a discursive link between activist, militant and terrorist groups and as such it is not unusual to sometimes find individuals from across the Islamist spectrum speaking on the same platform and with the same types of

political messages. *However, this shared sense of cultural angst does not mean that activists or militants support the wider aims of terrorist groups or their violent methods.*

This shared perspective of cultural anxiety not only links disparate groups across the political spectrum in Southeast Asia, but also provides the basis for deepening contacts with similar movements in other parts of the Muslim world. Indeed, the rejuvenation of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia can be understood only within a larger global context. To be sure, Islamist groups within Southeast Asia often reflect their own particularistic characteristics; traits deeply rooted in the respective histories and cultures concerned. But at a deeper level, regional Islamist groups also reflect important empirical and symbolic connections to the Islamic world more generally.

A PYRRHIC VICTORY?

On a positive note, a number of high profile terrorists – both from Southeast Asia itself and from outside the region - have been rounded up in counter-terrorism operations launched in the wake of 11 September 2001, but especially since the attacks in Bali on 12 October 2002. It is also true that increased surveillance and intimidation in the name of furthering the counter-terrorism agenda have been targeted mainly against select groups rather than entire communities. Even so, in the minds of many in the region the threat of a return to past authoritarian excesses under the guise of countering terrorism appears to outweigh the small number of arrests and detentions thus far. Indeed, the view that the US and its Western allies loom as the real forces behind such initiatives risks feeding the impression in critical community circles that Washington, London and Canberra are accomplices to the revival of political repression.

In their 2003 survey *Views of a Changing World*, the non-partisan Pew Research Centre recorded a significant growth in anti-American sentiment across the non-Western world, but especially in Indonesia. Not only were 74% of Indonesians ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ worried about potential US military action against their country, but when asked which three world figures could be trusted to ‘Do the right thing regarding world affairs’, Usama bin Laden scored a credible 58% approval rating, just behind Yassir Arafat (68%) and Jordan’s King Abdullah (66%). US President George Bush did not rank. Less surprisingly, nor did Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

There is a need, however, to exercise caution and not conflate bin Laden's charismatic appeal with support for terrorism. A more likely explanation for this attitudinal phenomenon is that many individuals sympathise with the issues that bin Laden claims to care about – Palestine, the plight of oppressed Muslims, cultural justice, and so on. At the same time, the support suggests a deep sense of dissatisfaction among ordinary Indonesians with their current plight, and a tendency to blame the US (and to a lesser extent its allies) for this state of affairs. This is consistent with developments in other parts of the world. Anti-Americanism (and anti-Westernism more generally) is becoming a key driver not just of terrorist actions, but in militant and non-violent anti-globalisation movements as well. For some, there is nothing new to this development - anti-Americanism has provided a sub-text to oppositional politics for many years. And it is true, anti-Americanism has been a theme intimately connected to religiosity in the non-Judeo-Christian world – the US was demonized because it was perceived as the font of secular culture and the main prop to what were perceived as apostate regimes throughout the Muslim world.

However, the anti-American theme that is contained in recent oppositional rhetoric from across Southeast Asia (and more widely) suggests a de-coupling of this attitudinal hostility from religion. In other words, inspired by an image of *al Qaeda* as a resistance movement, a growing number of secular radicals appear willing to consider emulating the violent tactics of their more pious co-alienated. The forces behind this development were encapsulated neatly by the respected US journalist and commentator Fareed Zakaria in early 2004 when, in an article for The Washington Post, he observed that the War on Terror is a war of ideas. However, he mused, 'I am not sure we are winning it'.

Zakaria's observation underscores *al Qaeda*'s widening appeal as a symbol of resistance for Islamic peoples more generally, but also in Southeast Asia. To this end, the organisation has successfully recast itself and is increasingly seen less as a vehicle for an archaic form of political Islam and more as a vanguard movement for resisting 'repression' worldwide. This repackaging of *al Qaeda* has allowed the group to exert a particular influence over young alienated urban Muslims in North Africa and Western Europe – and we can not eliminate the possibility that, chafing under tighter surveillance and restrictions on their political activities, younger people in Southeast Asia will also begin to embrace this model of resistance.

Importantly, this does not mean that the *al Qaeda* network is expanding in Southeast Asia, that the region is poised to become the 'second front', or that the region is home to comparatively more terrorists than other parts of the world. With regard to the former point,

the practice of casting *al Qaeda* as a ubiquitous global network has always been an exaggeration for which there is little tangible evidence (see Burke 2003).

Rather, in Western Europe and North Africa new groups appear to have emerged without any direct input from *al Qaeda* in terms of funding or logistic assistance. Moreover, they appear to be less religiously motivated than inspired by a visceral hatred of the US and its supporters in both the West and the Middle East more generally. For example, the US State Department's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Ambassador J. Cofer Black, recently pointed out that the world is seeing the emergence of a 'new cadre of [terrorist] leaders' who are relatively untested in terms of field operations, but who are nevertheless inspired by a romantic interpretation of *al Qaeda*. As observed by a senior European intelligence official – '*al Qaeda*'s biggest threat is its ability to inspire other groups to launch attacks, usually in their own countries' (quoted in Bonner and Van Natta 2004). The emergence of these new groups carries the worrying implication that the phenomenon of mass casualty terrorism might be in the process of breaking out of the confined realm of religious demagoguery and establishing itself within the consciousness of a wider constituency. It is this contingency that poorly calibrated counter-terrorism initiatives risk conjuring in Southeast Asia.

It is worth noting, however, that an associated factor driving this development has nothing to do with the abuse of counter-terrorism powers in Southeast Asia per se, but with forces that lie beyond the region in the form of anger with the US-led invasion of Iraq. Speaking at the opening session of the World Economic Forum in January 2004, Harvard University's Jessica Stern echoed these views when she opined that, 'We are not safer', and that the US-led invasion of Iraq has 'increased the ability of *al Qaeda* and its sympathizers to "prove" that the objective of the United States is to humiliate the Islamic world, more than it was to liberate the Iraqi people' (quoted in Brown 2004).

CONCLUSION

Writing on the eve of the 2004 US Presidential election, a writer in the Jakarta Post opined that:

The U.S.'s penchant for unilateralism has become more pronounced these last four years. ... We saw this on the question of global warming, on trade and investment, on global security and geopolitics, and on matters of international justice. The positions taken by the United States to serve its own narrow interests undermined its reputation as a champion of free trade, the environment, human rights and justice. ... Inevitably,

these positions have also weakened America's moral strength in addressing these issues. A politically and militarily powerful America that does not enjoy moral authority is doomed. Past empires met similar fates. (*Jakarta Post* 2004)

It is naïve in the extreme to assume that those in Southeast Asia who worry about the integrity of their recently won freedoms are not concerned by the hypocrisy that underscores the gulf between Western rhetoric or human rights and its actions in support of this rhetoric. It is similarly naïve to assume that pockets of violent opposition to established political structures will not seek to capitalize upon the cynicism that this hypocrisy sometimes breeds.

As with many other parts of the world, terrorism will remain a dangerous albeit irregular feature in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, it is wrong to associate this development with pathological urges inimical to Islam. Rather, if there is a single most important cause of any future spread of terrorist violence in the region it will be the role played by Western-sponsored policies of repression and the denial of rights – an approach that threatens to accelerate the evolution of angry activists into murderous terrorists.

Supporting the cultural and structural violence caused by the denial of human dignity embodied in human rights makes the West complicit in this humiliation – and it is incumbent upon all of us to work to ensure that the restoration of human dignity remains the bedrock upon which our own government's approach to combating terrorism rests.

The festering of Muslim anger builds on a widely held image of the United States as the main prop to an international system that denies Muslims their cultural, economic and political rights. At a practical level it is irrelevant that this view might be naively simplistic or that its prevalence often results from deliberate disinformation spread by the political elites in these countries as a way of deflecting critical attention from their own administrative malfeasance. What matters is that *the myth is believed* and that in so being it is for many a reality.

NOTES

¹ For a Jungian analysis see Stevens (2004). For a Freudian perspective see Blok (1998).

² For a more nuanced account of the nature of al Qaeda see Burke (2003); on Southeast Asia see collected essays in Crouch et al (2002).

³ For a fuller exploration of this theme see Kapitan and Schulte (2002).

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