

# The Islamic Defenders Front

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HRWF (15.06.2017) - During the authoritarian regimes of Soekarno (1959-66) and Soeharto (1966-98), stringent checks kept on violent radical Islamists prevented the spread of their ideology in Indonesia. Nevertheless, following Soeharto's resignation in 1998, the lifting of restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of association/assembly resulted in the proliferation of these Islamist groups and their presence in the media (Islamic extremists' newspapers, magazines, books and websites were permitted to circulate).

## ***The Islamic Defenders Front, a moralist radical group***

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is the best known of the radical groups that exist in Indonesia. The FPI was founded on August 17, 1998 (Indonesia's Independence Day) by Habib Muhammad Rizieq Shihab and KH Misbahul Anam. Both expressed their concern with the so-called rise of immorality and anti-Islamic behaviors<sup>1</sup> in their communities (Fealy 2004). In contrast to other radical groups (which have been associated with Wahhabism and Salafism), the FPI is an indigenous group. It follows the traditional Indonesian Islam and has been linked to Sufi mystical brotherhoods. The members of the FPI are known to have limited religious education, and many come from criminal backgrounds (Woodwark et. al. 2009).

The FPI vigilant group is known for its violent actions against so-called places of vice. Most of the attacks of the FPI have been targeted towards bars, nightclubs, brothels, and other "immoral" places. Dozens of FPI members have assaulted such venues with long sticks, destroying properties and, oftentimes, harassing their staff and owners.

Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that the FPI accepts bribes from bar owners and others in order to abstain from attacking their facilities. The FPI also conducts attacks against minorities. In a video recorded on 2008, Sorbi Lubis, General Secretary of FPI, called on FPI followers to kill Ahmadiyah Muslims<sup>2</sup> (Woodwark et. al. 2009). The FPI also targets Christian minorities claiming that they are carrying out missionary activities, threatening Islam. In 2010, the FPI carried out five attacks on the followers of the HKBP Philadelphia Church in Bekasi and injured twenty people. Police forces did not respond to the incident. Furthermore, in 2012, FPI militants in Singkil protested the presence of churches, which they claimed to be illegal, and demanded that they should be closed down. Their demands were met; the churches and a place of worship belonging to a local faith were shut down (Incet and Ugur, 2015).

The FPI has described itself as *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah* (adherents of the Prophetic tradition and the community). The group embraces the implementation of *shari'a*, as well as constitutional recognition of the Jakarta Charter but it does not support the creation of an Islamic State, unlike the Islamist radical organizations Darul Islam (DI), the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI). It recognizes the Pancasila-based Unitary Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) as the final form of the state. The FPI believes

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<sup>1</sup> The FPI was particular preoccupied activities such as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol consumption, which they considered to be "anti-Islamic."

<sup>2</sup> The Ahmadi movement has its origins in British-controlled northern India in the late 19th century. It identifies itself as a Muslim movement and follows the teachings of the Quran. However, orthodox Muslims argue that Ahmadiyah Muslims are heretical because they do not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind.

that the role of the government should be to make individuals better Muslims, instead of changing the basis of the State. Furthermore, since 2002, the FPI has suffered major setbacks. In that year, Habib Rizieq was arrested and found guilty of inciting hatred, and was subsequently jailed for seven months. From that point until February 2003, the organization stopped its operations, claiming that it had been infiltrated by the police and other spies (Fealy 2004).

The FPI and other extremist groups rely on two rulings from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI)<sup>3</sup> to justify hate speech and sectarian violence. In 1980, the MUI issued a fatwa declaring Ahmadiyah to be a deviant sect. The government did not take any action against this ruling. Similarly, other Islamist groups, which at the time were persecuted by the state, remained silent. In 2002, Saudi Arabia sponsored conferences and religious gatherings that lead to anti-Ahmadiyah violence. Furthermore, the second MUI ruling on which radical groups rely was issued in 2005. The MUI confirmed and strengthened the 1980 fatwa and called for the Indonesian government to disband Ahmadiyah organizations. Since 1998, the Indonesian government has shown more inclination to consider MUI advice, as it depends on Islamist groups for parliamentary support (Woodward et. al., 2013).

### ***Links with state apparatus***

There exist links between the FPI and senior figures in the Indonesian military, police, and government. In fact, in 2011, WikiLeaks released documents suggesting that the Indonesian police have provided funds to the FPI. In 2013, calls for the dismantling of the FPI, resulted in repeated episodes of violence<sup>4</sup>. Islamic clerics in Central Java spoke out against the organization. Nonetheless, government figures have shown sympathy towards the FPI. Gamawan Fauzi, the Home Affairs Minister, has called to form a constructive relationship with the FPI, claiming they can be a "national asset" ("Christian Solidarity Worldwide" 2004). The FPI has been particularly present in Jakarta slums that have been targeted by eviction programs. For instance, in 2016 when the government threatened to evict approximately 1,000 people of the Luar Batang neighborhood, the FPI went in to provide food, clothing, and volunteers to aid the community.

Despite pressure from the police, the FPI has continued to engage in violent attacks. In January of 2017, the mass organization Gerakan Masyarakat Bawah Indonesia (Indonesian General Society Movement or GMBI) called on the government to disband the Islam Defenders Front. The petition cites the last incidents in the cities of Bogor, Ciamis and Tasikmalaya where alleged FPI members attacked and burned down GMBI secretariats. Twelve other organizations signed the petition. Fauzam Rahman, Chairman of GMBI, has claimed that the petition was aimed at FPI leader Habib Rizieq ("The Jakarta Post").

In January 2017, the police named Habib Rizieq as a suspect over allegations that he insulted the secular state ideology in the world's biggest Muslim-majority country. Police in the province of West Java has been investigating the leader of FPI over allegations that he made defamatory statements about Sukarno, one of Indonesia's founding fathers, and that he questioned the legitimacy of Pancasila, the state ideology. Rizieq has denied wrongdoing. Slamet Maarif, spokesman of FPI, said the allegations were intended to "silence Muslims demanding justice" (Da Costa, 2017).

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<sup>3</sup> The MUI is an official body and the voice of the Indonesian Muslim community. There are representatives of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) on the MUI fatwa council. The fatwas of the MUI are purely advisory to the government. Nevertheless, Islamist organizations adhere to the rulings of the MUI.

<sup>4</sup> There were a series of clashes between members of the FPI Temanggung branch and locals of Sukorejo in Kendal.

## **Campaign against Christian governor Ahok**

Rizieq had been a key organizer of rallies that took place at the end of 2016 against Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, Jakarta's governor, an ethnic Chinese Christian, who was accused of insulting the Quran. In May 2017, Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of blasphemy, based on a video in which he spoke out of context about a verse in the Quran. FPI militants managed to get the court's endorsement of their narrative of blasphemy, which includes the assertion that non-Muslims should not be allowed to comment on the Quran's interpretation. In the verdict against Ahok, a judge quoted a verse from the Quran (Al-Maidah 51) which purports to suggest that Muslims should not elect non-Muslim leaders. The objective of the campaign against Ahok was to prevent his re-election because he was a Christian<sup>5</sup>.

## **FPI leader prosecuted on charges of pornography**

Also in May 2017, the FPI leader Rizieq was linked to a scandal involving pornography and an extra-marital affair. The Indonesian police stated that Rizieq would be charged with violating Indonesia's pornography laws. However, some rights advocates said they were troubled that Mr. Rizieq would be charged on pornography counts — specifically, committing extramarital sexual acts captured on media — instead of more substantial crimes, such as intolerance, hate speech, hate crimes.

Rizieq has denied the accusations and has fled to Saudi Arabia. A number of analysts believe that the charges against him could consolidate support for the FPI. Ian Wilson, a researcher in politics and security at Murdoch University in Australia, claimed, "if the political goal is to nullify the FPI, then it's a serious miscalculation." He went further to add, "each time he's spent time in jail, the organization has grown, the martyrdom complex has grown."

The aim of Islamist groups is to influence the elections in 2019. Indonesian political parties and lawmakers have long debated whether radical groups should be banned in the country, but they fear taking such action would lead to terrorism.

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<sup>5</sup> The campaign proved to be successful as Ahok lost the election against Anies Rasiyd Baswedan, a former education minister and a Muslim.

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### **Suggested reading**

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The Islamic Defenders Front: Demonization and the State in Indonesia  
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