

Radical Islamism in Southeast Asia

Islam has been well-established in Southeast Asia for some ten centuries and is now its most widely-practised religion, with some 250 million adherents (c. 40 per cent of the population). There are Muslim majorities in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pattani Province (southern Thailand) and Mindanao (southern Philippines).

There have been several Islamic insurgencies across the sub-region over the last half-century, the most successful being that in Aceh (northern Sumatra), where the right to be governed under Sharia law has been won. Others have been less successful and some are ongoing, especially in Mindanao and Pattani. Each has tended to be independent of the others.

By early 2017, anticipating the collapse of its caliphate in Iraq and Syria, Islamic State (IS) decided to create a caliphate in Southeast Asia and began directing personnel and finances to this objective. IS gained the loyalty of some previously competing groups on Mindanao. Marawi City, the 'Muslim capital' of Mindanao, was seized by IS-aligned militants on 23 May. Philippines armed forces immediately started to clear the city of insurgents, but it was not liberated until 23 October after five months of heavy fighting during which more 1100 people were killed, 900 of them militants, including the leaders of the uprising.

While the IS goal of a Southeast Asian caliphate would appear to have been thwarted for now, the strategic threat remains. Paul Dibb, on pp. 9 – 11 of this issue, draws attention to the threat posed by militant Islam in Indonesia – a nation of some 240 million people, 87 per cent of whom are Muslim. Fundamental Islamists want Indonesia to become an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. The recent successful overthrow and prosecution of the Jakarta governor, a Christian, for blasphemy against Islam, is an example of their growing political power. With a strong minority actively campaigning for an Islamist Indonesia, there is a real danger that it could become a militarised Islamic state by mid-century.

Given this potential, it is important that we understand the nature of militant Islamism. Robert Manne's recent book, *The Rise of Islamic State*, which is reviewed on p. 29 of this issue, is a good place to start. Manne points out that IS has a powerful ideology guided by intellectuals steeped in the theological tradition of Islam. This tradition requires Muslims to engage in jihad against both 'apostate' Muslim sects and against all infidels, until all the world is Islamic. Modern jihadists seek to revive this tradition of Muslim militancy. It is active in many parts of the Muslim world and is not confined to IS.

In light of these developments, especially the arrival of IS on our doorstep since the 2016 Defence white

paper was published, it is vital that Australia's defence policy and strategy be reviewed for both relevance and adequacy.

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