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“The Danger of Intolerant Above-ground, Non-clandestine Organizations is Bigger for Indonesia Than Violent Extremism”: An Interview with Sidney Jones on Religious Extremism, Political Violence and Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia

Gunnar Stange

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Sidney Jones is director of the Jakarta-based *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict* (IPAC). From 2002 to 2013, she worked with the International Crisis Group, first as Southeast Asia project director, then from 2007 as senior adviser to the Asia program. Before that she worked for the Ford Foundation, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. She is an expert on security in Southeast Asia, particularly Islamic terrorist movements in Indonesia. Jones has analyzed and extensively written on separatist conflicts (Aceh, Papua, Mindanao), communal conflicts (Poso, Moluccas), and ethnic conflict (Kalimantan) in Indonesia. She also has studied Islamic radicalism, producing reports on the Islamist terrorist network Jemaah Islamiyah and its operations in Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as issues of security sector reform and decentralization in Indonesia. This interview was conducted and recorded at IPAC office in Jakarta on 20 August 2019. It focuses on questions of religious extremism, political violence, and conflict dynamics in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: Conflict Analysis; Conflict Transformation; Indonesia; Radicalization; Violence

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GUNNAR STANGE: *First of all, thank you very much for taking the time for this interview. What is your motivation for your work with IPAC?*¹

SIDNEY JONES: It has changed over time, I think. When I first came to Indonesia in 1977, I had no background on Asia, let alone Southeast Asia or Indonesia. I worked with the Ford Foundation. It was the most fantastic job imaginable because I was giving grants in the fields of Islamic education, public interest NGOs, preservation of the traditional arts, assistance to provincial law faculties. And then, nine years later, I left to work with Amnesty International (AI) for a variety of reasons; it was the Islamic dissidents I was particularly interested in, especially those who were arrested under the Suharto government for wanting to establish

1 IPAC was founded in 2013 as an Indonesian NGO after the International Crisis Group (ICG) discontinued its Indonesia program. IPAC (2013) mainly focuses on Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and the southern Philippines in its “mission is to explain the dynamics of conflict – why it started, how it changed, what drives it, who benefits – and get that information quickly to people who can use it to bring about positive change” (n.p.).

an Islamic state. In a way, it was in Amnesty International that the marriage of interest in human rights and in Islamic extremism came together. My current interest is more to understand Islamist extremists’ networks after they had been arrested, but not to get them released, although I want to ensure that they are treated properly.

After 4 years at Amnesty International and nearly 16 years at Human Rights Watch, I was finding that a human-rights-focus alone was too constricting. It did not allow you to actually get the nuances of what was taking place, especially in conflict affected areas like Aceh². I wanted to look at the conflict more generally and wanted to understand it in more than just human rights terms. That was one of many reasons that I left Human Rights Watch. And then, this opening came up with the International Crisis Group (ICG). Back then, in 2002, the Singaporeans and the Malaysians had started a crackdown on extremists. They all were mentioning this organization *Jemaah Islamiya* and the name Abu Bakar Ba’asyir. I said I know those names as I was working on these cases at Amnesty International. In my files, I had the original trial documents of Abu Bakar Ba’asyir in 1983.³ So, I asked ICG if they were interested in a paper on the antecedents of these cases, and they said yes. That paper came out two months before the Bali bombing.⁴ It became a kind of reference point. That is how it all began.

STANGE: *Do you intend to affect change with your work?*

JONES: Yes, and I think we can. You cannot transform a society overnight. But what you do is you take broad objectives and then you break them down into doable parts. If you think about it in that way, I think you can affect change. Even if it is something as relatively small as bringing a group interested in reintegration into contact with a group that conducted reintegration successfully somewhere else. Even just by having standards in your own research where you insist that people doublecheck their sources. That can actually have a transformative change down the line. On the extremism side, we are doing a lot of training with senior police officers. We can take policy ideas and give them directly to people who are in responsible positions. There was one project we did on West Kalimantan before the local elections in June 2018. Because of identity politics the tensions between Dayak Christians and Malay Muslims were rising to a point that there was a serious possibility of violence. One of the police [officers] took the report⁵ and the introduction and recommendations and ensured that every police station in Kalimantan had a copy. Because of the warnings in the report, they increased temporarily the number of police officers in Pontianak⁶ and the surrounding areas. We do not know about cause and effect, but fact is that violence did not transpire. I think that is impact.

2 In the northern-most Indonesian province of Aceh, a thirty-year armed conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) was finally ended in August 2005 by a peace agreement between the conflicting parties (Aspinall, 2009).

3 The radical Islamic cleric Ba’asyir is one of the co-founders of the clandestine Islamist terrorist network *Jemaah Islamiyah* that is responsible for major bomb attacks in Indonesia during the early 2000s (ICG, 2003).

4 See, ICG (2002).

5 See, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (2018).

6 Pontianak is the capital of the Indonesian province West Kalimantan.

STANGE: *If we look at the results of this year's Indonesian general elections,⁷ it seems that Indonesia is deeply divided between those who favor a rather conservative and even autocratic style of politics and those who want Indonesia to be an open and pluralist society. How do you think this affects the political climate in Indonesia?*

JONES: There were certainly a lot of tensions around the election time, but it dissipated remarkably speedily after the elections were over. It does not mean that the divisions are not there but the saving grace about Indonesia is that the divisions are all cross-cutting. It means you are divided on one issue, but you are aligned on the principle 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' on another issue. So, you do not get the kind of polarization that would come if the only division was conservative versus moderate Islam. That is one dividing line, but we also have the Java/off-Java dividing line, which was very evident in the elections. We also have majority/minority divisions. We have age divisions, we have gender divisions, and within each camp of opposing groups there are all those internal divisions. They spend as much time fighting each other as they do fighting whatever external enemy happens to be there. I think, broadly speaking, it is true that Indonesia has become more socially conservative over time. It is also true that the political power of majoritarian Islam has increased. That is very clear from survey data now. That has consequences for Indonesia going forward. But it is also the case that finally there is a backlash against that. One of the forms that the backlash takes is the mobilization, particularly of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU)⁸ into a much more dynamic organization that sees one of its roles as fighting extremism. I remember about ten years ago I was talking to one man with an NU background who was kind of despairing of the fact that NU was depending on its cultural inheritance rather than actively recruiting people for its survival as an organization. At the time, they were losing members to Salafi organizations such as *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI)⁹ to more militant organizations that had a greater appeal. He said at this point, we have to learn how to be militantly moderate. And that is what is happening now. Now, we are working on a paper that is looking at the paramilitary part of *Ansor*, *Banser*, and how they now have indoctrination programs and military training.¹⁰ They have kind of taken a leaf from the model of militant organizations and are applying it to their model. One of the consequences is perhaps an increased risk of violence between those paramilitary groups.

7 General elections were held on 17 April 2019. Incumbent president Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi and considered to represent a multi-religious and pluralist vision of Indonesia, won the race with 55.5% of the popular vote against his sole competitor Prabowo Subianto, representing a rather Islamic conservative and authoritarian vision of the country. After the official results of the race were publicly announced in May 2019, supporters of Prabowo started rioting in the streets of Jakarta accusing election officials of widespread fraud. (Suhartono & Victor, 2019)

8 NU is the largest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia deeply rooted in the Javanese tradition of Islam. It claims to have more than 40 million members. (see, Bush, 2009)

9 Hizbut Tahrir was one of the leading radical Islamic organizations in Indonesia. It was banned in 2017 by a decree signed by President Joko Widodo for opposing the state ideology Pancasila and seeking to establish a caliphate. (see, Osman, 2018)

10 *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor* (GP Ansor) is an Indonesian Islamic youth movement affiliated with NU. *Banser* (*Barisan Ansor Serba Guna*, Multipurpose Ansor Front) is a militia organization and the military wing of Ansor. (see, Ronika, Syamsuddin, & Kuswanjono, 2019)

STANGE: *Would you say that Indonesian society has become more violent or has Indonesian society become more ready to accept violence as a political means?*

JONES: It depends what you are comparing it to. If you compare it to the killings in 1965/66, no. The problem of looking at Indonesia is that most people’s time frames are too short now. We did a study looking at the attitudes of Indonesian students studying in Turkey and Egypt toward the developments in those countries in 2015 just after Mursi had fallen and as Erdogan was becoming more authoritarian in Turkey. What was shocking was that these kids were not remembering 1998. We were in a generation that had grown up and reached their maturity after the transformation from the New Order that had taken place. The only system they knew was democracy. They could not relate developments in Turkey or Egypt to what had been happening in Indonesia. They did not remember it. I think there is a lot of people now that see Indonesia becoming more authoritarian. And there are some worrying indications. This includes people who do not remember the New Order. Those people who do remember the New Order and are seeing danger signs deserve more attention perhaps because they understand what these indicators can lead to. For example, there are many of us who thought the banning of HTI was not a good idea. I do not think that the banning of the *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front)¹¹ is a good idea. What you should do, you arrest the people who are committing crimes, but you do not suddenly ban associations. That can become a tool that people can use against anybody, any organization that they dislike. I think this is a potentially authoritarian tool. It is not necessarily being used yet in an authoritarian way, but it is certainly a danger sign.

STANGE: *Speaking of potential outbreaks of violence, against the backdrop of the 2018 Surabaya bombings, how likely do you think it is that Indonesia will be seeing another wave of terrorist attacks in the near future?*

JONES: I think the danger of intolerant, above-ground, non-clandestine organizations is bigger for Indonesia than violent extremism. I think the terrorism problem is being managed, but partly because Indonesia is not that conducive to the growth of terrorist organizations more generally. It is not under occupation. It does not have a repressive government; it is not a Muslim minority situation where Muslims are being persecuted. There is not a sense of injustice or grievance. We don’t have internal conflicts – as in Ambon and Poso – that are leading to that idea that Muslims are the victims. And, there are no nasty neighbors stirring things up. Why should there be terrorism? In some ways the question is why is there terrorism at all? It is manageable, but I would not attribute it all to good law enforcement. That is a factor, but that is not the whole story.

11 FPI is an Indonesian Islamist civil society organization that was founded in 1998. It positions itself as Islamic moral police and is notorious for vigilante actions against people, organizations, and places that its members consider morally unacceptable according to their interpretation of Islamic values. (see also, Seto, 2019, in this issue)

STANGE: *Moving on to a related topic that has been hotly debated in recent years, why do you think the otherwise quite capable Indonesian security sector fails time and again to protect religious minorities against assaults and guarantee religious freedom? Do you think that there is a rationale behind it?*

JONES: It is very significant that 97% of minorities in Indonesia voted for Jokowi as opposed to Prabowo because they think that conservative Islam is turning them into second class citizens. The majoritarian flavor of some speeches and stances of some mass organizations have come to the point where it is now impossible for any Christian to ever be considered as president, head of the armed forces, or senior leader of almost any organization related to security. The idea that Muslim majority areas have to be ruled by Muslims has taken real root. I should say that in Eastern Indonesia the same idea has taken hold among Christians, and there are very similar incidents of local communities refusing to have mosques build and so on. But, of course, the scale is overwhelmingly different, and even if those incidents take place it does not swage the fears of minorities that live on Java or the major islands that their continued rights as citizens of Indonesia are in jeopardy. I think there are several reasons why the state has not come to the protection of non-Muslim citizens. One of them has to do with the transformations that took place in 2005 that allowed direct local elections.

When it became possible to elect figures directly at a local level in Muslim majority areas, it gave real power to civil society actors who represented hardline Muslim organizations to actually affect political campaigns. I think 2005 was a real turning point. I also think that the Ambon and Poso conflicts were a real turning point, the first real turning point in post-Suharto Indonesia,¹² because both of the conflicts were the first time when Muslims saw Christians as a serious threat to their survival. And, in both conflicts, there were more Muslims killed than Christians. It is a fact that a lot of people outside Indonesia do not realize that. They have that vision of extremist Muslims massacring Christians. It happened, but there were more on the other side that took place. I think that transformed the attitudes of many Muslim organizations to a majoritarian stand: "This is our country. We have to defend it. If we don't, our survival could be at stake."

Additionally, the success of the fundamentalist Islamic *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS, Prosperous Justice Party) in its initial ventures into politics actually convinced people that an Islamic agenda in the polls could succeed. Even though, by and large, Islamic parties have not been successful. All of the advances in the political have taken place from civil society organizations operating from outside the political sphere. But, all of that combined reinforced this feeling, even within the security forces, that their allies that they needed to partner with were on the Islamic side and not on the minority side. It violates every element of the basis on which Indonesia was founded. I still think there are many in Indonesia who see a broader inclusive society as desirable and something that should be maintained.

12 For a detailed study on the communal violence on the Maluku Islands between 1999 and 2002, see Schulze (2017).

But I think there is no question that they have lost ground. At one of my lectures at a police institute, I talked to Indonesian police sitting around the table after a brutal incident that involved mob action in which three Ahmadis were beaten to death.¹³ I asked, “Why don’t you arrest these people when they commit crime?” Three hands went up. The first one said, “We did not get any instructions from above”. The Indonesian Police is a very centralized organization, and it is true, nobody dares to move unless it comes down from the top. The second one said, “If we go against them, they will come after us.” So, the mob situation was another factor. The third comment was, “We still use them as partners”. That is true. For example, in one case the police hired the FPI to sit in a court room when one of the extremists was being tried. So, there was no room for that guy’s own supporters to be in the court room. It was full of white-robed people, but they were all opposed to the person being tried.

STANGE: *In how far do you think has decentralization affected conflict management in Indonesia?*

JONES: Decentralization has thrown up all sorts of possibilities for conflict, particularly through the role of *pemekaran* (expansion; the possibility to form new districts and provinces) and this process of dividing existing districts or provinces into smaller units. In many areas of Indonesia, particularly eastern Indonesia – Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Papua, Maluku – *pemekaran* is effectively dividing up Indonesia by ethnic groups. When you have a district that is multi-ethnic, and there is one dominant ethnic group, the number two ethnic group can become the dominant majority, if they have a specific geographic territory where they are dominant, once they split off. As long as they can pay the people you need to pay, because it is a very corrupt process, you can get your district. Only fairly recently, there was a moratorium placed on the creation of new districts and new provinces. I don’t think that there is any way that decentralization can end up contributing to better management of conflict. It is exactly the opposite.

STANGE: *Moving on to Papua, do you see signs that Jokowi will use the relative freedom of his last term to attempt bringing the conflict in Papua to a lasting solution?*

JONES: No. Even if he wanted to, it is not possible. But I do not think he wants to. I do not think that this aspect of it plays any role in his thinking. Like any other president before him, he believes it even more that infrastructure and economic development will solve the political problem. That is why he will go there and support the Trans-Papua Highway¹⁴. There is no understanding that money will not buy you peace. They did not learn any lessons from East Timor, and they did not learn any lessons from Aceh. The conflict in Papua is not a single conflict. It is multiple conflicts on multiple levels in multiple areas of Papua.

13 On 6 February 2011, 1,500 Muslim rioters surrounded an Ahmadi neighborhood in Cikeusik, Banten province. Three Ahmadis were beaten to death and five were injured, with police officers witnessing the scene without interfering. (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 1)

14 The Trans-Papua Highway consists of 12 partly unfinished road segments across Papua and West Papua provinces with a total length of 4,325 kilometers (see, Sloan et al., 2019).

I think the idea of UP4B¹⁵ was a correct one, that you should have in the government one person responsible to the president who is the strategist on Papua policy. But, unlike UP4B, that person needs authority and a budget with a veto power over line ministries to actually effect policy change in Papua. But there is an assumption, which is wrong, that if only the Javanese would go away, Papuans would be able to solve problems by themselves. That is not the case. *Papuanization* in terms of putting Papuans in charge of local government has only increased corruption, has only increased *sukuization*¹⁶ in terms of clan structures, and has only increased mismanagement and bad governance. It does not bode well for what would happen if you gave them even more authority. What you need is a combination of papuanization and oversight from Jakarta. One of the things that happened with the Special Autonomy Law for Papua is basically that Jakarta threw up its hands saying, we give you all that money and you do what you like with it, and we hope you will not be doing very much with it because it is actually in our interest that you mess it up.

There is all of this talk about dialogue. I do not think the preconditions for having a useful dialogue are present. I think the idea of this *Jaringan Damai Papua* (JDP)¹⁷ under Muridan Satrio Widjojo, the late wonderful LIP1¹⁸ scholar, who helped to draft that Papua Road Map,¹⁹ was absolutely right. What you need is to build a united voice in Papua that can articulate specific goals that then be presented to the government as expressing the will of Papuans. And his vision was to have public consultations across different parts of Papua and then frame the results in a way that would provide guidelines for different policies. The problem was it got hijacked by Papuans who were more interested in their own interests than actually trying to craft a single voice. I don't see how it is possible to be optimistic about Papua.

STANGE: *When it comes to violent conflict in Indonesia, where do you see the country in five years?*

JONES: I will not answer this because every prediction that I have made about this country has been wrong. It really is hard because Indonesia defies prediction. It is a country that never meets people's hopes, but it also never falls into your worst fears. It goes its own way in a way that suddenly throws up people. Who heard of Jokowi two years before he was elected? I do not know what is going to happen.

STANGE: *Sidney, thank you very much for taking the time for this interview.*

JONES: You are welcome.

15 *Unit Percepatan Pembangunan Provinsi Papua dan Provinsi Papua Barat* (Unit for the Acceleration of Development in Papua and West Papua).

16 The term *suku* means people or ethnic group.

17 Established in 2010, the Papua Peace Network facilitates dialogue between Papuans and the Indonesian government (Pamungkas, 2017).

18 *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia* (Indonesian Institute of Sciences).

19 The Papua Road Map was drawn up by a team of LIP1 scholars in 2008, a model for the solution of conflict in Papua that adopted a justice approach based on recognition, development, dialog, and reconciliation (Widjojo, 2008).



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