

Getting radical
www.time.com
Sep. 03, 2001
Simon Elegant

For a man in his position, Taufik Abdul Halim is serenely calm. The 26-year-old Malaysian lies on blood-stained sheets in a police hospital in Jakarta, far from his home in Johor. His left leg is a mass of wounds wrapped in grimy bandages. His right leg has been amputated below the knee. When he awakes from the anaesthetic, he is informed that policemen are guarding him around the clock and that he faces prosecution for crimes that carry the death penalty. He has been in the hospital since Aug. 1, when a bomb he was carrying went off, apparently prematurely, in a shopping mall, injuring four others. He denies wrongdoing and says he didn't know what was inside the bag he was carrying. "I think it was fate," he says.

In fact, it was faith, not fate, that brought him to his current plight. Taufik left Malaysia a year ago to help his Islamic brethren in the province of Maluku, where thousands have died in bloody clashes between the province's Muslim and Christian communities. "I saw pictures of what was going on and wanted to help protect the Muslim villages," he says. Four other Malaysians are being sought by police for questioning about the bombing at the mall and two explosions at Jakarta churches in July that left 70 injured.

Taufik and friends wanted in on a jihad: an Islamic holy war complete with bombs, bloodshed and the possibility of martyrdom. Such sentiments wouldn't be unusual in, say, Iran or Afghanistan. But in Malaysia, a country normally considered a non-radical fringe of the Islamic world, the rise of such fervor is turning heads. On Aug. 4, police in Kuala Lumpur announced the arrest of 10 members of the Malaysian Mujahideen Group. The alleged ringleader was Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the soft-spoken spiritual leader of the opposition Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party. Seven of the 10 arrested were also members of the Islamic Party, police said. The group reportedly aimed to topple the Malaysian government and establish an Islamic state. Police, who reported finding stockpiled assault rifles and grenades, contend that the group carried out several recent crimes: a botched bank robbery earlier this year in which two of the group's members were killed, the assassination of a state assemblyman and several bombings of Christian churches and Hindu temples.

Opposition politicians complain that the government has yet to show any proof of the alleged crimes or prove the group has any substantial connection to the Islamic Party. But the involvement of so many party members has stoked deep concern among Malaysia's non-Muslim minority who make up some 40% of the population about the party's character and goals should it ever come to power.

For the first time in Malaysia's history, that is a real possibility. Boosted by anger at Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad after the toppling and jailing on corruption and sodomy charges of his popular deputy Anwar Ibrahim, the Islamic Party has seen support among the country's majority Muslim Malays soar. "The party could well win a majority of the Malay vote in the next elections," says A.B. Shamsul, who teaches social anthropology at the National University of Malaysia. (A general election is likely within the next two years.) In Malaysia's complex multi-racial politics, the Malay vote is key to winning power: Mahathir's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, largely through a lock on Malay votes.

For the country's minorities Chinese, Indians, tribal groups a group like the Mujahideen sets

off loud alarm bells, particularly when a renewed passion for Islamic piety is welling up among younger Malays. Even among the non-radical majority, a new kind of rhetoric is on the rise. There is a shift among young Malays toward what Farish Noor, an academic who specializes in the influence of Islam on Malaysian politics, calls: "a jihad mentality." Says Farish: "The vocabulary of political debates is already all about jihad and martyrdom and heaven and hell. That kind of rhetoric is dangerously inflammatory." Some Malaysians, like Taufik, have gone further, by trying to export jihad. Malaysian police say the busted Malaysian Mujahideen Group had extensive contacts with similar groups in Indonesia and elsewhere. Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi warned recently that Malaysia had become a new international center for Islamic terrorism.

The government's heated rhetoric strikes some Malaysians as provocative and politically motivated. The arrest of the alleged Mujahideen members and a recent ban on all political gatherings are signs "that UMNO feels threatened," says Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who is also the Chief Minister of the east coast state of Kelantan, where the Islamic Party has ruled for 11 years. "It is like a wounded tiger trying to attack everyone because it feels trapped." Asked about his son's arrest and his alleged role in the Mujahideen Group, Nik Aziz shows a rare flash of emotion: "The government is trying to get me to beg for the release of my son," he says. "I will not do it. I am not going to bow or swallow my pride."

The 69-year-old acknowledges that his son fought for Afghanistan against the Russians in the 1980s: "Islam encourages this, and I am proud of my son." But since then, he says, his son has led a quiet life as an Arabic teacher in the party's Darul Anuar school outside Kelantan's capital of Kota Baru. The school founded by Nik Aziz and located next to the traditional stilt house that remains his home is a bastion of Malaysian Islamic fundamentalism. A majority of the school's 1,400 students will go on to further study in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan or Pakistan. When they return, most expect to become religious teachers.

The worldview among the students produced in this closed system can seem stiflingly narrow. Abdul Salim, a tall 19-year-old wearing a white skull cap, is about to graduate from the Darul Koran school in Terengganu, another state ruled by the Islamic Party. Abdul plans to go to Syria to study when he graduates. His views are uncompromising on everything from relations between men and women ("I think it is of low morality to speak to women other than my mother or sisters. It is against Islam to do so") to the establishment of an Islamic state ("I would like Malaysia to be totally Islamic: Islamic education, Islamic economy, Islamic judicial system and total Islamic administration of the country").

It may be unfair to read too much into such teenage fervor. But students like Abdullah come under even more radical influences when they go overseas, says Farish, the academic. That's particularly the case in Pakistan, close to the fighting in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The Islamic Party says it doesn't send students there, though many go on their own. Kuala Lumpur has no idea how many Malaysians are studying in Pakistan. "I've visited a school in Peshawar that was officially listed as having three Malaysian students," Farish says. "In one class there were 50." Taufik and most of the 10 alleged Mujahideen members arrested in Malaysia all spent time in Pakistan, where weapons and training camps for would-be mujahedin are commonplace.

Islamic Party leaders say they have no connection to the Mujahideen Group and are quick to disassociate themselves from calls for violent jihad. But National University of Malaysia professor P. Ramasamy notes that the party remains fully committed to the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia, a commitment that has virtually destroyed its uneasy alliance with the largest opposition Chinese party. Attempts by the party to impose full

Islamic Shari'a law in the two states it controls including penalties such as stoning and limb amputations have only been stopped by the need to pass a constitutional amendment first.

The Islamic Party still has much explaining to do if it is to convince the country's non-Muslims that its more fervent members won't cross the line between belief and extremism. That could prove a hard case to make. Listen to 18-year-old Abdullah, a student at the Darul Anuar school. An open-faced, bright-eyed boy, Abdullah flashes a winning smile that disappears as soon as the subject of Islam comes up. "Jihad is the responsibility of every Muslim," he says. If he had the opportunity to fight for the Muslim cause in Indonesia or Kashmir, he would go immediately. "To die a martyr's death in defense of Islam is my greatest ambition." The big question for Malaysia is whether Abdullah and his like-minded friends are loose cannons or a growing vanguard.

With reporting by Mageswary Ramakrishnan/Kuala Terengganu and Jason Tedjasukmana/Jakarta

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