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Militant Islamic Congress Is Sparsely Attended in Indonesia

By JANE PERLEZ

SOLO, Indonesia, Aug. 10 — Menacing looking young men with their heads wrapped in Arabic scarves guarded the foot of an outdoor stage and others guided guests to their seats for the opening of a militant Islamic congress here in central Java today.

The meeting of a group founded by the country's best-known Islamic militant, Abu Bakar Bashir, was supposed to show that the radical Islamic movement was very much alive despite the fact that Mr. Bashir is now on trial on treason charges. Mainstream politicians, including Vice President Hamza Haz, have embraced Mr. Bashir in the past.

But only a relatively small crowd of several thousand turned up, leading the organizers to hold the ceremony under tarpaulins outside the walls of the city stadium, instead of inside the arena.

Furthermore, none of the invited mainstream politicians showed up.

Most notably, Mr. Haz, who was listed on the program, did not come. Nor did Din Syamsuddin, a top official of Muhammadiyah, one of the nation's largest Muslim organizations. Hidayat Murwahid, the leader of the Justice Party, an increasingly popular group that wants to impose Islamic Shariah law on Indonesia, was also absent.

Today's sparsely attended event comes five days after the bombing of the J. W. Marriott hotel in Jakarta, which killed 10 people and wounded more than 150. The Indonesian police have said the Marriott attack was almost certainly the work of Jemaah Islamiyah, a militant Islamic group founded by Mr. Bashir in the mid-1990's and closely linked by Western officials to Al Qaeda.

Operatives of the group, which has been declared a terrorist organization by the Indonesian government, have also been declared responsible for the bombings in Bali last October that killed more than 200 people. Some leading Jemaah Islamiyah members are graduates of Mr. Bashir's religious boarding school, a run-down complex of buildings on the outskirts of this city.

The group that met today, Majelis Mujahedeen, was founded by Mr. Bashir in 2000. In contrast to the underground Jemaah Islamiyah, it operates openly, intent on making secular Indonesia into an Islamic state.

The lack of big names may have deprived the event of the legitimacy it sought.

But many paramilitary groups were on display. Brigade Al-Ishlah members wore their black baseball caps. The Jakarta-based Movement of Islamic Youth, some of whose members trained in Afghanistan, was there, as well as Lasker Hezbollah. But the most numerous were young students from Mr. Bashir's boarding school here, in blue sweat shirts, blue fatigues and black boots.

The poor turnout showed that Indonesian leaders now know it is no longer useful to be associated with radical Islam, said Sidney Jones, an expert on Indonesia. "That means there is a real sea change in Indonesia since the Bali bombing," said Ms. Jones, the director of the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based organization that focuses on crisis prevention. She has written extensively about Mr. Bashir.

"The Indonesian political elite and the Indonesian public now feel that organizations that flirt with violence are no longer acceptable," she said.

A Western intelligence specialist on Indonesia said he regarded today's meeting as an important barometer of popular feeling about radical Islam here in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

"This means it's a dirty association," the intelligence official said of the poor turnout. "It has lost its legitimacy. At last the message is getting through that Bashir maybe a terrorist."

The overwhelming majority of Indonesians practice moderate forms of Islam, but Western officials have become increasingly frustrated as President Megawati Sukarnoputri and other leaders refrained from criticizing the militants. Vice President Haz, for example, visited Mr. Bashir during his early days in prison.

That reluctance to create distance with the militants had changed to a limited degree over the last few months as testimony in the Bali trials indicated that Jemaah Islam-iyah had a well organized terror network inside Indonesia.

The bombing of the Marriott, an American-managed hotel in downtown Jakarta that Indonesian government officials used for meetings and entertaining, drove the point home even further. A former government minister was among those injured in the blast.

The 64-year-old Mr. Bashir had asked to be released from prison in order to appear at today's gathering. When that was refused, there was some talk that he would send a video. But that did not happen either.

Instead, his longtime associate Irfan S. Awwas read a speech that he said had been written by Mr. Bashir.

The speech railed about how the Indonesian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech but does not guarantee the right of Muslims to practice Shariah. "What is the meaning of freedom if Muslims can't have Shariah law?" he said.

The crowd booed the local governor when he reminded them that Indonesia had been founded as a secular state.

The biggest crowd pleaser was Mr. Bashir's lawyer, known as Mahendra, who came to Solo from Jakarta on a flight this morning dressed in casual weekend clothes and then quickly changed into the all-white garb suitable for a religious appearance. "Some Muslims say they are Muslims but don't support jihad," he said, referring to religious war. "They are not real Muslims." There were shouts of approval.

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