



INDONESIA: OBAMA MUST GO THERE

By Theodore Friend

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President Barack Obama has now twice postponed carefully planned trips to Indonesia, a land of his childhood education. Health care legislation and oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico have been the causes: which suggests that big domestic preoccupations take precedence over attention to Indonesia, one of the world's major nations. Such priorities are not shameful, but are truly regrettable – because Indonesia is the only country in the world where Islam, democracy, and modernity go easily hand-in-hand. The United States, convulsed with consumerism, obsessed with religion, and uncertain of its international friendships, needs such a partner as Turkey has ceased to be, and Indonesia is willing to become.

There is no denying some of the ugly sides of modernity in Indonesia – the arbitrary, the corrupt, and the violent. But each of these has softened in the last dozen years. Suharto, a willful autocrat, so taxed the patience of his people that his generals finally deserted him in 1998. Transparency International still ranks Indonesia among the more opaque business-and-political systems in the world—#111 of 180 nations in 2009—rising because some effective high-level prosecutions have been launched in recent years. The Armed Forces of Indonesia once considered East Timor its private plantation and training lab, but a referendum there in 1999 went 80 percent for independence. After a last spiteful spasm of mass cruelty, the Army withdrew to reconsider itself and its national role.

Those deficits acknowledged, a brief summary of Indonesia's expressions of democracy takes three forms: progress in politics, uniqueness in religion, and creativity in civil society.

Indonesian history, from its revolution against the Dutch in 1945 until the end of the twentieth century, was the story of two dictators. Sukarno was a charismatic populist and a voluble theorist. As a consummate weaver of myths, he generated national pride with his own imagination; but his contempt for economics left him unable to cope with four-digit inflation except by blaming it, absurdly, on colonial forces of the West. The per capita income of his people was \$65 per year while he spun his last magical cocoon, NASAKOM: an ideological blend of nationalism, religion, and communism. With it went a foreign policy alliance of which he boasted as a Beijing-Pyongyang-Hanoi-Jakarta axis. But the communist element overestimated their revolutionary potential, and sprang a murderous coup (9-30-65) that eliminated six top officers of the general staff. Immediate response from surviving leaders mobilized nationalist and religious elements, and the ensuing political frenzy, across months, isolated Sukarno

and wiped out an estimated 500,000 communists.

The general who emerged from these convulsions as the new national leader, Suharto, was confirmed as president in 1967. His style was totally different. Even though his Javanism partly overlapped Sukarno's mysticism, he was vastly more practical about political and economic forces. Peasant astuteness moved him to go on *haj* in 1991 and proclaim his personal Islamic convictions, just as it had earlier enabled him to rely on young economic and financial advisors with American Ph.D.s. He used Indonesian words for development (*perkembangan, pembangunan*) tirelessly for decades. He bored his people. He allowed his family to enrich itself grossly on public projects and franchises. Per capita income for Indonesians generally, which in 1975, at \$265, had been comparable to India and China, had by 1997 tripled to \$785, far exceeding those other two major nations. But that was the year of general Asian financial crisis, in which Indonesia, with its casino-style stock market and habitual pilferage from on high, suffered worst of all. Unrest everywhere, and finally riot in Jakarta, forced Suharto into retirement.

Indonesia sorted itself out from ensuing semi-anarchy and had its parliament elect a president in 1999. Poor performers in that office did not daunt the people, in the direct presidential elections of 2004 and 2009, from turning out en masse, electing and re-electing Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a former Suharto general who had American officer training and European experience. From an electorate only 80 percent the size of the USA, Yudhoyono received more votes than G.W. Bush in 2004, and again more than Barack Obama in 2008. An exuberantly democratic populace found itself reaching (2009, estimated) an income in purchasing power parity of \$4,000 per year.

Indonesian democracy with regard to religion is not "pluralistic" in the Western sense, but its deep Sufi background provides it with a mystic gentleness and capacities for synthesis far more marked than in other Muslim cultures. To mention only Saudi Arabia and Iran: the exclusive Sunni orthodoxy in the first case and the hyper Shiite orthodoxy in the second make not only for governments that are rabidly suspicious of each other, but for popular attitudes that run from cultural hesitancy about anything alien to extreme xenophobia. Rather than pluralistic, Indonesia is best described as a "multi-confessional state." In the pangs of revolutionary birth, its leaders defined it so as to embrace the variety of religious cultures already extant within its borders. National development for six decades has favored a multi-lane thruway in this regard, as distinct from any narrow trail of orthodoxy. To the original five religions defined as okay – Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism – Confucianism has been cautiously added. Only one conviction exists globally that would be dangerous to profess in Indonesia. That is atheism. Such a worldview is indissolubly attached to communism, to the failed coup of 1965, and to the indiscriminate retributions that followed. The Indonesian polity is grounded in belief in a Divine Creator; and even if that should perplex disbelievers like Christopher Hitchens, it appears to most Indonesians as commonsensical.

One must note jarring intolerance where it does occur. In Indonesia there were about 28 church burnings last year. And trivial bannings: the MUI (Indonesian Council of Ulama) has uttered social rulings against spandex gym suits for women, and Valentine's Day; as well as motivating, more seriously, the anti-pornography act which passed the parliament in 2009. The language of that law is so sweeping as to deny Hindu culture on Bali, not to mention possible impairment of the tourist industry there.

The Supreme Court in 2010 has sustained (8-1) the 1965 Law on the Prevention of Blasphemy and Abuse of Religion. But even if that Court is expressly unwilling to pattern Indonesian law on American jurisprudence regarding the Establishment Clause, I see the basic role for religions in Indonesia's collective identity, when compared with American democratic values, as much more compatible than disharmonious.

With regard to “civil society,” there is again a democratic analogy between the USA and the Republic of Indonesia. It is well to remember that this term gained its currency with regard to Eastern Europe before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Indonesia was watching and listening. The concept took hold there, too, as earlier had the activities evoked by it, and now the assessments implied in it. Indonesians in the 1990s increasingly squirmed under, and then more openly struggled against, the clumsy corporatist repressions of the Suharto regime.

In the dozen years since the dismantling of Suharto’s governmental structures, Indonesian society has seen many flowers bloom. Their radiant profusion may be far lesser than in the USA, but it rises from fertile social soil. It sprouts readily and portends a society by degrees ever more flexible in entrepreneurship, sensitive to labor, innovative in education, and concerned about the environment.

Three examples may suffice: Kapal Perempuan, which advances alternative education for women in several critical and creative ways; KONTRAS, which continues to oppose state suppression of dissent, even despite the murder of its founder, Munir, in 2004 (the prosecution of which has been a great disappointment of Yudhoyono’s regime); and Koalisi Kemiskinan Kota (Urban Poverty Coalition), which is not only an attentive advocate of the poor in Jakarta, but a leader in the rebuilding of 25 fishing villages in Aceh after the catastrophic tsunami.

Indonesia, in short, inhabits a vast ground distinct from the barren no-democracy of Burma, and the sterile electoralism, actually hyper-democracy with hypo-governance, familiar to the Philippines. Indonesia rises above its neighbors to bear comparison with the group of nations in the new (and economically motivated) appellation “BRIC” (Brazil, Russia, India, China). In its political, religious, and social democracy, on some days and in many ways Indonesia surpasses all of them. In many ways and on most days its conduct of life in the twenty-first century harmonizes with that of the USA. Why, when Brazil and Turkey link up to obstruct international sanctions against Iran, has the USA not yet drawn closer to its most natural ally among Muslim cultures?

How long can President Obama go on postponing his trip to Indonesia without endangering the broad and fertile partnership his visit would imply and advance?

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