

## Australia and Indonesia Remain the 'Odd Couple' of Southeast Asia

Tim Lindsey

The recent meeting on Batam between Prime Minister John Howard and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was widely reported as a critical moment in the Australia Indonesia relationship. The two leaders kissed and made up and announced that the rift caused by the arrival of Papuan asylum seekers and the release of Abu Bakar Bashir had been resolved: the latest crisis in Indonesian/Australia relations was over.

Except that it was never a crisis. There was, in reality, no concrete issue in dispute between the two countries: no concession was given by either leader in Batam and, in fact, none were sought. The 'reconciliation' required nothing, because there had never been any real split between the two governments. The letters exchanged between the two leaders before their Batam date make this clear, basically agreeing on the key issues and reaffirming the status quo:

- Bashir is a threat, but his release was a matter for Indonesia's legal process and can't be interfered with.
- Indonesia's sovereignty over Papua is supported by Australia but the grant of visas to 42 Papuans was a matter for Australian legal process and can't be interfered with.

So where was the supposed bilateral crisis that hogged headlines for weeks and resulted in the recall of the Indonesian ambassador?

It was largely symbolic, comprising formalistic government responses to controversies created by legislators on both sides of the Arafura Sea. In Australia, Jakarta is always an easy target to kick around to embarrass the government of the day, as Australian Shadow Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd has been doing lately. The same is true of Canberra for Indonesian politicians, especially Commission I in the DPR, which handles Indonesia's foreign relations.

Why? Because, like Australia, Indonesia is a democracy now - a real one, with a strong legislature, a tightly-constrained presidency and power vigorously contested by a multitude of political parties, none of whom have a majority. In this atmosphere of open, often intense, debate, voter margins are fine and the differences between our two countries are enough to provide constant opportunities for legislators in either country wanting to play the nationalist card.

In fact, spats between Australia and Indonesia have been common since overt political repression ended in Indonesia in 1998. They will continue in the future. That shouldn't surprise us, nor should it concern us too much. It is, after all, normal for neighbour countries to have exchanges like these, precisely because they are neighbours: people move to and fro across their borders and so events in one country tend to affect the other.

The truth is that Indonesia's democratization and the diverse political debate it has allowed has created *both* more opportunities for differences of opinion *and* a far

better context for managing them. This why most recent conflicts – including Timor, Papua, Schapelle Corby, the Bali 9 drug convicts or Abu Bakar Bashir – have all been handled reasonably well. Each time, points of difference are made clear, protests lodged and debate ensues, following which the relationship returns to calm quickly enough and most links between the two countries – whether in education, security, business, cultural or private - are left largely undisturbed. And that is very much to our mutual benefit.

Think about it. When the tsunami hit Aceh, Canberra's contribution of a billion dollars over its existing AID budget made it a major aid player in Indonesia. Likewise, Indonesia's strong support for Australia finally won Australia a place at the ASEAN table, balancing other regional powers. Australia's Federal Police may have been criticised in Australia for their cooperation with the Indonesian police because of the Bali 9 arrests in Indonesia but that same, highly-effective cooperation has been instrumental in helping Indonesian police catch hundreds of terrorists, a far more significant issue for both nations. This is true too for border control. It has become obvious in Australia that arrivals cannot be stemmed without Indonesian support.

So, deep cooperation between the two countries is proving effective in precisely those areas at the base of many recent disputes. And as East Timor becomes Australia's problem (to the amusement of many Indonesians) rather than a bone of contention between the two countries, the government-to-government relationship between the two countries has, in fact, rarely been as strong, not even when Keating was Soeharto's golden boy.

This is because the bilateral relationship now has the ballast Keating's Foreign Minister Evans always said it needed. And the bulk of this ballast is made up of public servants and private citizens on both sides who have a professional or personal reason to value the relationship between the 'odd couple' countries of Southeast Asia. These include institutional linkages and person-to-person relationships in business, education, aid or the arts that are usually resilient enough to survive the latest bilateral tiff because they are based on the deeper understanding and, often, sympathy and affection, that direct contact can deliver

But for those Indonesians and Australians who have no personal or professional connection with the other country - the majority - perceptions are quite different. They are, at best, deeply ambivalent, even confused, about each other. Above all, they are deeply suspicious. Their perceptions are dominated by anger, hostility, contempt and fear, are vituperative in expression and are often wildly inaccurate in content. And they are easily inflamed lazy and ignorant journalists and by politicians looking for a populist can to kick.

So, buckle up and brace yourself for continued bilateral crises for the foreseeable future. But don't worry too much about them – most of them will not lead to real conflict and many of them will be healthy signs of a relationship slowly developing the sort of depth and complexity that it should have been had decades ago.

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