

Megawati Needs Us, We Need Her

[Tim Lindsey](#)¹

This article was published in the *Herald Sun* on Wednesday 16 October, 2002.

The decisions the governments in Jakarta and Canberra make in the next few weeks will determine the future and stability of the region for decades to come.

There is much at stake. Australia is the largest economy in the region but Indonesia has the biggest population.

Its 215 million make it the biggest country on earth after China, India and the US. It is also, ironically, both the third biggest democracy and the biggest Islamic nation.

Despite its problems of instability and economic crisis, Indonesia is still the "superpower" of ASEAN, with an effective veto on Australia's role in the region. Indonesia still matters for Australia.

Our sense of national mourning makes it easy for us to blame the government of a country where so many young Australians died senselessly.

But directing our anger at President Megawati Sukarnoputri's embattled government would be the wrong call.

Her moderate, secular government has a deep-seated commitment to resisting extreme Islam. It was Sukarno, Megawati's father and Indonesia's first President, who crafted a tolerant national ideology to provide space for religious and ethnic differences.

His vision of secular nationalism has been followed by all five Presidents of Indonesia.

In this they have been strongly supported by the Indonesian military. Yes, it contains Muslims but it has historically been opposed to extremist Islam, which it sees as a rival for power.

Australians must understand that Islam in Indonesia, as everywhere else, is not a monolithic religion.

It spans beliefs that reflect the range in Christianity from the Klu Klux Klan to low church Anglicanism.

On this scale, al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah are at one extreme, while Indonesian Islam is the far opposite.

Some Middle Easterners don't even regard Indonesians as true Muslims.

There are small groups of extremist Muslims in Indonesia, but this is a Southeast Asia-wide problem.

The Philippines has recently experienced extremist bombings and kidnappings and Malaysia and Singapore have arrested many al-Qaeda-linked terrorists.

We should also remember that Indonesians died in the Bali blasts. Indeed, Bali is only the most recent of a spate of terrorist attacks across Indonesia over the past few years.

Mrs Megawati has been the target of assassination attempts and most Indonesian Muslims are as frightened of extremist Islam as we are.

For these reasons, it is likely the Megawati Government will take the opportunity to move firmly against Islamic terror organisations, although it won't be easy.

Contrary to popular belief in Australia, the Indonesian armed forces are extremely small for the size of the population, and are per capita the worst-funded and the smallest in number in the Asia-Pacific region.

They are also severely stretched by arms embargoes, ethnic conflict in the region and the continuing economic crisis.

Mrs Megawati must now work with a weakened military without letting them use this as an excuse to regain power.

She has other problems too. Every politician in Indonesia has eyes only for the 2004 elections. Islamic parties see advantages in tacit support for hardline Islamic rhetoric, when middle-class Muslims are frightened by what they see as an American war on their religion.

Vice-President Hamzah Haz has previously offered public protection for blast suspects Jemaah Islamiyah. He will find this much harder now but he may still create difficulties.

Finally, the bombing will devastate Bali's tourist industry and the national economy.

The Jakarta elite who invest heavily in Bali will be badly damaged. So we should accept Indonesian statements that they intend to act on terror as they have every reason to do so.

What we must now do is allow Mrs Megawati to walk the difficult tightrope between Islamic political forces and her own moderate secular instincts. She has the backing of most Indonesians in this.

It would be a further tragedy if Australian criticism prevented her from doing what Australia wants to do: crack down on terror.

We already have extradition treaties and a framework for mutual cooperation and there is much Australia can contribute to this investigation.

So far Indonesia shows all signs of welcoming that support. This is the path we must take as confrontation and hostility will only damage our moderate allies and strengthen our extremist enemies.

¹ Tim Lindsey is Associate Professor of Law and Director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne.