



Indonesia: Not There Yet, But Getting There

by Dr. Dino Patti Djalal

It is easy not to envy the position Indonesia is in these days.

The economic crises hit many Asian countries, but Indonesia is arguably the only one that has to contend with political, economic, security, social, and ethnic problems, all simultaneously. The four presidents who have ruled the country (Soekarno, Soeharto, B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid) would concur that Indonesia is a difficult country to govern under any circumstances. It is, after all, a developing country of 200 million people with 300 ethnic groups scattered over thousands of islands, with a history punctured by instability and turbulence, and a relatively young and restless nationalism. Such is the enormity of its challenges that Thomas Friedman has called Indonesia (along with Russia) a "messy state... too big to fail, too messy to work."

Indeed, becoming the world's third largest democracy is more than a matter of transition: it is a question of transformation -- a massive one. And transforming a society as huge, diverse, and complex as Indonesia is bound to be messy. For all its problems, however, there is really no option other than to help Indonesia press forward with democracy, and to reform and maintain its national unity, for the following reasons.

First, there is no guarantee as yet that Indonesia's new democracy is irreversible. The country has had only two free and fair multi-party elections in 55 years -- democratic traditions do not have strong roots in Indonesian history, but authoritarianism and feudalism do. Not all of the groups who welcomed the fall of President Soeharto in May 1998 are necessarily pro-democracy. Today, the forces for democracy must still compete with groups who have little interest, let alone appreciation, of it. On some occasions, "authoritarianism of the mass" has replaced "authoritarianism of the state." Unless democratic processes and institutions quickly take root and deliver results, the pendulum may swing back the other way.

Second, preventing the disintegration of Indonesia is infinitely better than curing it once it happens. Indonesia's break-up would open a Pandora's box which will unleash protracted ethnic conflicts even more difficult for Jakarta and the international community to control. In such a situation, the country's transition would descend from a matter of managing change to managing chaos, especially as secessionist regions become a breeding ground for terrorism, anarchy, and extremism.

The most sensible way to deal with Indonesia's troubled nationhood is simply to preserve and heal it. Nationalism now ranks among the most important factors shaping Indonesia's domestic and foreign policies. While Indonesians were willing to

tolerate the 1999 secession of East Timor (which was not part of the Republic in 1945), they are much more sensitive and protective of the existing nationhood, which was conceived by the founding-fathers at the time of independence. Which explains why the secessionist movements in Aceh and West Papua are seen as issues of national survival as much as of national unity and identity.

Third, given its strategic position and size -- it is the largest state in Southeast Asia -- Indonesia's problems matter to regional order and stability. Unless democratic transition brings stability, prosperity, and unity, Indonesia would not be at peace with itself and one way or another this may adversely impact the region and beyond. A stable, united, and prosperous Indonesia best serves the region's interests.

Ultimately, Indonesia's multi-problems require multi-solutions: national unity, economic recovery, and democratic reforms. These solutions are mutually reinforcing; a pick-and-choose approach just won't do. Without economic recovery, there won't be political stability and some of the provinces will grow more restless. Without unity, the country will plunge into instability with huge economic costs and this may reverse democratic reforms. Without democratic reforms, economic reform loses credibility and political stability will be lost.

Yet, it is also important to give Indonesia ample elbow room to get its house back in order. Democracy anywhere will not blossom unless it is home-grown. The challenge of reform in Indonesia is not to drift from one form of extremism to another, but to find the right balance for the co-existence of democracy with stability, devolution with unity, reform with prosperity, and freedom with peace. Indonesians need time to work out this delicate balance, but it is unwise for others to push Indonesia too hard in this process. After all, there is no point in being a democracy if it cannot find its own course, make mistakes, and sort out its own problems. The current political disputes, ethnic conflicts, and constitutional debates will probably slow down the efforts of Indonesians to find a stable and solid political format, but the experience of overcoming these challenges will be critical for Indonesia's democracy to reach maturity.

Indonesia's current predicament tends to magnify its problems rather than its achievements. But do consider these: in the 30 months since the resignation of President Soeharto set off "reformasi" in May 1998, Indonesia has held peaceful free and fair elections, had two peaceful presidential change-overs, revived multi-party democracy, amended the constitution, settled the East Timor question, reformed the military, amended the constitution, restored freedom of speech and association, rebounded the economy, and established a civilian cabinet; the political outcasts of the past have now become the nation's leaders. Most important, despite the immense problems still facing the country today, the country has managed to hold itself together.

Not so bad for a "messy state."

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