



The Bush Administration Will Be Taking Indonesia Seriously

by Ralph L. Boyce

[Editor's note: This article, which precedes the recent leadership change, provides useful background information on Bush administration policy toward Indonesia.]

Events are moving rapidly in Indonesia. Despite the crises that fill the headlines there are many signs of progress. But the historic transition to democracy is fragile, reversible and of vital importance to the United States.

A successful democracy in the world's largest Muslim nation would be a major positive development. However, the flip side, instability in the world's fourth most populous state, would threaten not only Indonesia's immediate neighbors but also American strategic and regional objectives.

Indonesia's 13,000-plus islands span critical sea-lanes and airways, and the country has vast natural resources, including oil and natural gas. Without a stable and supportive Indonesia, the Association of South East Asian Nations (which is holding its annual meetings in Hanoi this week) could be rendered hollow. Growing social disarray in Indonesia could offer a regional entrée to Islamic radicalism and possibly international terrorism. Fragmentation of the Indonesian state would, of course, be a disaster for regional stability.

Indonesia faces serious challenges. Political contention in Jakarta has left the central government too divided and preoccupied to address even the most pressing problems. Separatist movements plague opposite ends of the Indonesian archipelago, in Aceh and Irian Jaya, while communal violence frequently erupts on the islands in between. These conflicts tempt the military to continue violating human rights.

Economic recovery has stalled and will not resume without resolute government action that can come only when Indonesia's current political struggle is resolved. Although the United States follows the politics in Jakarta closely, we firmly believe that the current leadership crisis is a purely domestic matter. We do hope to see the crisis end in a way that promotes reconciliation and effective governance. The Bush administration is prepared to support any resolution that can be achieved through peaceful and constitutional means.

However, even as we view Indonesia's numerous problems, we need to be mindful of the many positive developments unfolding quietly, out of the headlines. Since the widely successful 1999 elections, democracy has begun to take deep root. Civil society is flourishing, with multiplying nongovernmental organizations contributing to public discourse.

Governmental and social institutions have begun to strengthen. Most notably, Indonesia now boasts an independent and vigorous Parliament.

A good measure of the contentiousness we see in Jakarta today is not just a clash of political personalities but rather a struggle to define the respective powers of the branches of government.

Indonesia has also plunged into the vital task of government decentralization. Although it is proceeding unevenly and with some confusion, decentralization is both hugely popular and necessary to the eventual stability of an enormously diverse nation.

The United States wants to see a united, democratic, stable and prosperous Indonesia. But we must recognize that the ability of any outside actor to influence events there is limited. The size and complexity of that nation dictate that we focus on top priorities, maintaining a long-term strategic approach that can withstand inevitable shocks and crises without losing sight of overarching objectives.

While strengthening institutions, our strategy includes working wherever possible through nongovernmental organizations to continue to invigorate civil society. We particularly want to concentrate on judicial institutions. With vast ethnic diversity and a history of official abuse, Indonesia will not remain stable for long unless its citizens believe that grievances will receive a fair hearing.

Our program will include a concerted effort to develop a trained, equipped, and capable police force which can handle most civil problems and leave the military to concentrate on its proper functions. We will also carefully modulate our broader contacts with the Indonesian military as a part of any coordinated effort to strengthen Indonesia's institutions. The military remains a central, truly national institution, with enormous potential to support or subvert democratization.

In saying this, we do not ignore the human rights abuses by many members of the armed forces and the lack of accountability for these abuses. Legislative restrictions on American interaction with the Indonesian military are an important reminder to Indonesia and its armed forces of the importance of human rights issues to the world in general and the United States in particular.

Still, we can and should work constructively with the military to meet specific U.S. interests - regional stability, anti-piracy, and policing of the waters of Indonesia's huge exclusive economic zone come to mind. Over the long term, we believe we can foster professional reform without backing away from the importance of accountability for human rights abuses.

In the end, Indonesia's political stability cannot be maintained without economic stability and progress. Partial recovery from the collapse of 1998 is insufficient and will be unsustainable without politically painful reforms to alter the old system of sheltered oligopolies. Moreover, looming fiscal problems mean that these reforms must begin even while Jakarta is mired in political dispute.

Ralph L. Boyce is the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. This comment was adapted by the International Herald Tribune from his testimony on July 18 before a congressional panel.