



A New Spirit of Bandung? by Donald K. Emmerson

Fifty years ago, in April 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, the country's then-president Sukarno hosted a meeting that became a global icon of anti-colonial solidarity. The 29 African and Asian states represented at that first Bandung Conference swore their support for sovereignty and self-determination. Their priority was on national not individual freedom. The final declaration mentioned human rights. But it ignored the danger that foreign colonialists might be replaced with indigenous dictators. Democracy, corruption, and good governance were issues for the future.

This year in Indonesia, from 18 to 24 April, some 87 delegations, including 40 heads of state or government and more than 100 ministers, celebrated the "golden jubilee" anniversary of the Bandung Conference. In a series of summit, ministerial, and other meetings they sought to "reinvigorate the Bandung spirit" and forge "a new Asian-African strategic partnership" for the 21st century. The week climaxed on 24 April on the same day and in the same hall where the original conferees had launched the "Bandung spirit" of solidarity against imperialism half a century before.

Some of the leaders gathered for the celebration – Bandung II – were content to repeat the nationalist pieties of the past, or to redirect them from European colonialism to American unilateralism as the enemy of the day. But the current president of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, known as SBY, struck a different note. His theme was not independence but introspection, not sovereignty but self-reform. He gently urged his fellow rulers to replace the old dogma of national liberation with a commitment to "good governance" as the latest and highest priority for developing countries – in effect, self-reform as the new spirit of Bandung. At that moment, in Blitar, East Java, where he is buried, the nationalist firebrand Sukarno must have rolled in his grave.

"Good governance" did not and will not become the buzzword of Bandung II. The only other speaker who mentioned it, to my knowledge, was Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong. Fewer voices were raised in favor of self-reform than were aimed at American unilateralism. North Korea's Kim Yong Nam was among the latter. So was "Comrade R. G. Mugabe," as Zimbabwe's dictator called himself.

An Iraqi delegate, unable to insert in the ministers' communiqué a paragraph supporting his country's embattled transition to democracy, told me privately and bitterly, "The spirit of Bandung has not changed at all." In his view, most of the conferees in Bandung II preferred the odious sovereignty of Saddam Hussein to the induced democracy that followed, just as the leaders of the anti-colonial movement had tolerated tyrants in their ranks.

Yet SBY's speech did not fall on wholly deaf ears, and Iraq is not a good test case. More than a few delegates in Bandung supported democracy but opposed democracy-by-invasion. In developing countries, as representative government has spread, so has the desire to make it less corrupt and more effective. Over time, a new Asian-African agenda could give more prominence to democratization, religious moderation, the rule of law – and honest, accountable governments as means to these ends.

But even if this does not happen, even if SBY's challenge is forgotten, the prestige of successfully hosting Bandung II already has strengthened his otherwise vulnerably "American" position inside a country whose future will help tip the balance of extremism and moderation in the Muslim world.

SBY is John F. Kennedy-esque: tall, handsome, young for a head of state, and able to project a democratic vision for Indonesia. A retired army general, he received American military and civilian training, including a master's in management from Webster University. No president before him has had more American exposure. This background will be in the spotlight when he pays his first presidential visit to the United States at the end of May.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim society, the third-largest democracy, and a tropical archipelago where defenders of the Bush administration are as scarce as snow. Indonesians will appreciate SBY's American experience if it enables him to deal with the world's only superpower in ways that help Indonesia. But if he is seen as too enamored of supposedly "American" values, he will create an opening for his political opponents.

In Bandung on the last day of the commemoration, crowds lined the streets, smiling and waving at the VIPs. Through the closed windows of air-conditioned limos and busses, the VIPs waved back. Compared with the week's grand abstractions – sovereignty and self-reform – this third spirit of Bandung was fleeting and local. But unless Asian-African solidarity becomes more than a slogan, or the vision of a better-governed Indonesia comes true, it may have been the most real.

Donald K. Emmerson heads the Southeast Asia Forum at Stanford University. He is writing a book entitled "What Is Indonesia?" He can be reached at emmerson@stanford.edu