



A Yellow Light for Indonesia by Donald E. Weatherbee

For six years the administration of George W. Bush has nurtured a restored relationship with Indonesia. The U.S. views Indonesia as a key partner of the United States in dealing with the immediate concerns of counter-terrorism. Perhaps even more important for the U.S. will be Indonesia's role in shaping the longer term architecture for a stable and peaceful Southeast Asian region in which the U. S. will be a full participant.

A critical turning point in redefining the post-East Timor, post-Clinton Indonesia – U.S. relationship came in November 2005 with the waiver of all remaining legislative restrictions on U.S. military assistance to Indonesia. For the U.S., it was time to look forward to cooperation with democratic Indonesia rather than placing relations in the context of the past. In 2006, both governments at the highest levels could speak of a strategic partnership.

The outcome of the November 2006 U.S. congressional elections, however, puts a yellow light on the bilateral road ahead. A Democratic majority in both houses has brought back to key committees chairs, members (and staff) who may not feel the same level of comfort with Jakarta as do President Bush and his people. Issues of human rights, military reform, and Papua will resurface. Even if they do not result in action, the airings will roil the bilateral calm as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono gears up for his 2009 reelection campaign.

The new chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies is Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy. Leahy has been one of the most persistent critics of Indonesia's military. It was the Leahy Amendment in 1999 that put the nail in the coffin of normal U.S. – Indonesia military-to-military relations. As ranking minority member of the subcommittee in 2005, he was outraged by the waiver lifting the restrictions, calling it an abuse of discretion and an affront to Congress and said that it made a mockery of the process and sent a terrible message. His eye is also on the 2004 murder of human rights activist Munir Said Thalib. Leahy has voiced the suspicion, shared by many, that the Indonesian national intelligence agency was involved. He authored an amendment to the FY 2007 foreign operations appropriation bill requiring a report on human rights including the Munir murder. The continuing cover-up, in Leahy's words, makes it appear that a culture of impunity remains deeply embedded in Indonesian society. It can be expected that when it comes to FY 2008 appropriations, Leahy will want to send a different message than did the Republican majority.

On the House side, the new chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment is Rep. Eni Faleomavaega, the representative since 1989 from American Samoa and the fourth most senior member of the full House Foreign Affairs Committee. His subcommittee has broad oversight over U.S. foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Faleomavaega has already indicated that he has his sights trained on Indonesia. In a statement on Jan. 23, he announced that he intended to review human rights and democracy efforts in Indonesia.

Moreover, he stated that "I continue to have concerns about the situation in West Papua and look forward to working out reasonable solutions that bring about peace." A member of the House Human Rights Caucus, the congressman has a personal interest in Papua; he has relatives who have done Christian missionary work there. His notion of peace in Papua was made more specific in an interview in which he said, "If you want to talk about fairness, give the people of West Papua the right of self-determination." He plans public hearings on Indonesia's actions in Papua which will spotlight the advocates of West Papua independence.

Faleomavaega's attitude and intentions have already been noted in Jakarta where any sign of external questioning of Indonesia's sovereignty in its West Papuan provinces raises a red flag. It is a very sensitive topic for bilateral relations. The Australians found that out in March 2006 when Indonesia recalled its ambassador in Canberra over 42 Papuan asylum-seekers. The issues involved were not resolved to Indonesia's satisfaction until the Australians in the November 2006 Lombok security pact gave a written commitment to respect Indonesia's territorial integrity. The Bush administration has always categorically asserted a similar position. For this now to be questioned by a senior Democratic congressman in a policy-influential position encourages the pro-Papuan independence NGO networks and alarms Jakarta, given the context of a lame duck Republican president and the prospect in 2008 of a Democratic president.

An Indonesian nationalist backlash to a renewed Congressional assault on Indonesia will force President Yudhoyono into a defensive posture vis-a-vis the U.S. He is already on guard against economic nationalists, as demonstrated by the termination of the Consultative Group on Indonesia. He also has to ward off the radical Islamists who accuse him of abetting what they charge is an American war on Muslims. His public posture toward the U.S. at least will have to reflect the Indonesian domestic political environment, which will be altered as his political opponents seize on the American connection. One can only hope that the light doesn't turn red, interrupting the bilateral cooperative and productive

political, security, and economic links forged so far during Yudhoyono's presidency.

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