



Indonesia at the Crossroads: A View from the Hill

By *Peter T.R. Brookes*

Although it is almost a cliché to say so, fundamentally, for most Americans, Indonesia is the most important country they don't know is important. In some ways this has also long been true for the Congress as well. As you know, the congressional perspective on Indonesia has, unfortunately, long been a troubled one. In the past, congressional views of Indonesia often centered around the troubles on East Timor or even the Riady brothers and a bank by the name of Lippo.

This is, of course, a sweeping generalization but I don't need to tell the reader that relations between the Congress and Indonesia have been fraught with difficulty for some time. Having said that, I think that the events of the past year and the significant coverage of Indonesia in the American media have significantly raised Congress' consciousness about the importance of this large, strategic Southeast Asian country to regional stability, the world economy, and, ultimately, American interests.

As a result, I believe the current outlook from a congressional perspective, is now much more positive --and perhaps even hopeful -- than it has been in the past. Though many challenges remain, Indonesia appears to be moving in the right direction. The Congress appreciates progress towards a free press, independent labor unions, and political plurality. It welcomes the prospect of an equitable, peaceful settlement of the East Timor issue; free and fair parliamentary (DPR) elections this June; further economic reform; an apolitical military; and the development of an independent judiciary. Capitol Hill recognizes that Indonesia is at a critical point in its young history.

Political Reform and the Elections

It is incredible to think that the political scene in Indonesia today would have been quite unimaginable just one year ago. Who would have thought at this time last year that Suharto would be a private citizen today? From the days when GOLKAR was the only real political force on the map, Indonesia now has innumerable political parties. Political change and reform, which were once considered unlikely, are now front and center in any debate in - or on - Indonesia.

Amid a new environment of change and expectation, there is widespread agreement in the Congress on the need for a legitimately elected government to address severely needed economic, social and political problems. It is recognized that this will be a critical year in Indonesian politics and will hopefully provide a turning point in Indonesia's political evolution into a fully-fledged democracy. It is sincerely hoped, that the world's

fourth most populous nation will soon become the world's third largest democracy.

Current efforts at democratization present a historic opportunity for political transformation as Indonesians embark on rebuilding their nation's political, social and economic systems. Unfortunately, it is perceived in the Congress that much of the former system remains intact, including a powerful military (ABRI) and a parliament dominated by Suharto's former allies who will determine the terms of the evolving political framework.

The results of the June DPR elections will say much about the progress Indonesia has made and the direction in which it is heading. The Congress firmly backs the aspirations of the Indonesian people for free, fair, and transparent elections based on democratic practices and principles. To this end, the Congress is supportive of the significant aid package that the Administration has proposed for supporting the DPR elections. Congressional interest was recently expressed in House Resolution 32 on the Indonesian elections which urged the Speaker and the Minority leader of the House to designate congressional observers for the June elections. The resolution passed without opposition and enjoyed wide-spread support in the House of Representatives.

Despite this optimism, there are specific Hill concerns about Indonesia. The Congress would like to see the military return to the barracks and withdraw completely from participation in domestic politics. Some believe that ABRI may be the biggest obstacle to democratic reform with its already deep involvement in local and national politics.

Human Rights and Violence

Historically, the Congress has had a deep and abiding interest in the protection and promotion of human rights. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to pick up a daily newspaper without a report of violence from some Indonesian place--Ambon, West Kalimantan-- somewhere that most Americans or Members of Congress have never heard of. Similarly, emotions and the likelihood of violence can be expected to run high during the June elections and the East Timor referendum as well, where factional killing has begun.

The level and frequency of violence and the realistic expectation of its continuation is troubling to the Congress and undermines the perception of significant progress made in Indonesia's civil society over the last eleven months. Ethnic and religious violence is only exacerbated by the ostensible inability of ABRI to control it without resorting to abusive practices. It is time for Indonesia to develop an appropriate civilian police force capable of dealing with domestic unrest while leaving the army to concentrate on national defense. It is hoped that the recent announcement regarding ABRI's relinquishing control of the police force is more than a cosmetic gesture and leads to real

reform. The army must also refrain from arming militia groups of any kind, anywhere.

Continuing allegations of human rights abuses by ABRI - whether justified or not--will perpetuate the unfavorable legacy for the Indonesian armed forces on Capitol Hill and will stunt relations with the American military. Military relations, under the appropriate circumstances, are important for both militaries, U.S. interests, and for regional security. A resumption of American military aid or training at this time is clearly inappropriate.

The Hill thinks that cases of violence and human rights abuses, especially last May's rampant violence against ethnic Chinese, must be investigated fully and those guilty punished to prevent a climate of impunity from reigning in Indonesia - as we have seen in places like Cambodia.

East Timor

The East Timor issue has long been a burr under the saddle of U.S.-Indonesian relations. But the Congress is not obsessed with the past on this issue. It welcomes the decision of the Habibie government to address the status of East Timor. The major concern for the Congress--whether the outcome is autonomy or full independence-- is that the transition take place in a peaceful and orderly manner and that the East Timorese people be fully consulted at every stage of the process. Recent evidence is discouraging.

The Congress is concerned that any agreement not create a power vacuum that could lead to violence. The specter of a civil war on the island is very troubling indeed. All parties must resist the temptation of turning to violence in an effort to influence East Timor's future and instead turn to the ballot box this July. The Hill would likely be supportive of a United Nations or other peacekeeping force if necessary as East Timor transitions to autonomy or independence. The U.S. should be prepared to assist where necessary and possible.

The Economy

The Congress has a deep concern about the economic problems in Indonesia. The rampant corruption, cronyism and nepotism in Indonesia's business environment and government were some of the main reasons that the Hill was reluctant to provide additional funding for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last year. The Congress ultimately did the right thing and appropriated the additional funding but it is crucial from a congressional perspective that Jakarta continue to implement widespread reform of its economy. This means adhering to the IMF package; reforming the banking sector; and taking steps to reduce corruption, cronyism and the government's involvement in the economy in order to attract the necessary foreign direct investment required for economic recovery.

In conclusion, the Congress recognizes that Indonesia is a state in transition and is at a pivotal moment in its relatively short history as a nation. It understands that domestic instability in Indonesia will have an adverse affect on regional stability and American interests there. To this end, Indonesia needs a legitimate and capable government to address these issues and lead the country into the 21st century.

It is hoped that a stable and democratic Indonesia can continue to play an important and positive role in the security and stability of Southeast Asia. For the first time in many years, the Congress looks toward Indonesia with optimism and hope as the people of that diverse nation struggle to blaze a trail for its future generations.

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