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Repressing reform



Democracy and autonomy are sold out to Western economic and security interests

Scott Burchill

The attacks on the United States in September 2001, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and further terrorist attacks around the world since — including in Bali on 12 October 2002 — have had a significant impact on the way the West views Indonesia politically and strategically. These views are mired in double standards and neurosis.

The price of stability

In an ex post facto defence of the war against Iraq in March and April of 2003, Australia's foreign minister Alexander Downer launched a scathing attack on the United Nations (UN) and multilateral diplomacy. Speaking in June, Downer targeted one of the central planks of international society: 'Sovereignty, in our view, is not absolute,' he said. 'Acting for the benefit of humanity is more important' (26 June, 2003).

The significance of Downer's comments is revealed when they are contrasted with remarks he made a month earlier about Indonesia's renewed military campaign against Acehese rebels. Criticising the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), Downer said 'the violence perpetrated by the separatist movement is absolutely unacceptable' (21 May 2003). This view was endorsed by defence minister Robert Hill, who argued that 'Indonesia's got the perfect right to maintain its internal integrity and we regret those who are in armed revolt' (21 May 2003).

The contrast between Iraq and Indonesia is more striking than the failure of either Downer or Hill to criticise Jakarta's brutal repression in its western province. Clearly there was to be no acting 'for the benefit of humanity' in northern Sumatra. Sovereignty may not be absolute in the Balkans, Central Asia or Mesopotamia, but in Southeast Asia, it is apparently inviolable. This is an excellent illustration of both a double standard and an ongoing Western neurosis about Indonesia's territorial integrity.

Downer restated his view three months later at the UN: 'Old shibboleths — such as the excessive homage to sovereignty even at the expense of the preservation of humanity and human values — should not constrain us' (24 September 2003). Unless, of course, the victims are closer to home, when vocal Western cheerleaders can routinely traduce human values.

The West has long favoured metropolitan (meaning Javanese) control over an archipelago that is assumed to contain centrifugal and fissiparous forces. Jakarta's suppression of an anti-colonial struggle in East Timor and secessionist movements in Aceh and West Papua have long been supported diplomatically by Australia and the US. This is despite the lesson of history, which teaches that the immutability of political boundaries in the modern world is rare.

Irrational fears about political fragmentation and the diplomatic convenience of dealing with one administrative centre has frequently led Canberra to express a greater commitment to Indonesia's territorial integrity than has been demonstrated by many of the Republic's own citizens. As with East Timor, the West again risks finding itself on the wrong side of history.

Democracy or counter-terrorism?

There is scepticism about the prospects of an authentic democratic transition in Indonesia, which currently has the apparatus (eg free and fair elections) but not the political culture (eg civilianisation of political life) of a liberal democracy. A return to de facto military (TNI) rule along the lines of Pakistan is still possible, though optimists look to Thailand and Turkey as more desirable models for the future.

Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, global and domestic elite have little interest in how deep the roots of democracy in Indonesia spread. For over three decades Washington and Canberra felt very comfortable with General Suharto's authoritarian ways. Stabilising the economy has always come first.

Since the East Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s, the West has argued for reductions in endemic corruption and greater technocratic competence in order to restore the confidence of the foreign investment community in Indonesia. An end to local subsidies, obedience to IMF rules, and openness to overseas markets are crucial for the repayment of loans and debt: they are more important than parliamentary democracy.

A much higher priority since the events of 11 September 2001 is the suppression of Islamic terrorists. Washington and Canberra want to see President Megawati crack down hard on Islamists today in the same way they backed Suharto's suppression of communists in the mid-1960s.

The West has been very keen to portray Indonesia as 'a model of moderation' (Paul Wolfowitz, 17 May, 2002), with 'Indonesia's moderate traditions of Islam as a potential example for the whole Muslim world' (Paul Wolfowitz, 1 June 2002). Such an image would help to both neutralise anti-Western sentiment in the Islamic world and help sell US interventions in the Middle East and Arab world generally. In Indonesia, the neo-conservatives in the Bush Administration are looking for 'some sort of public relations campaign against [terrorism]' (Paul Wolfowitz, 21 November, 2002).

The Bali bombings on 12 October 2002 were not therefore just a 'wake-up call' (Paul Wolfowitz, 18 October, 2002). They were also an opportunity to renew old acquaintances. According to the US Deputy Defence Secretary, 'the reason the terrorists are successful in Indonesia is because the Suharto regime fell and the methods that were used to suppress them are gone' (Paul Wolfowitz, 18 October, 2002). A pretext to re-engage the TNI had been found.

'I'm not saying that every military officer that comes through training in the United States turns into a great democrat,' argues Wolfowitz, 'but I would argue that by and large the ones that have been trained here have a much more modern outlook, a much more democratic outlook, and they'll be much more supportive of what Indonesia needs to have in terms of democracy' (Paul Wolfowitz, 21 November 2002). The problem with this argument, according to Ed McWilliams, a former State Department officer who served in the US Embassy in Jakarta from 1996-99, is that 'the TNI's worst abuses took place when we were most engaged' (*Asia Times*, 18 July 2003).

TNI has a long, ugly and well-known history of internal repression, including links with Islamic militants (Laskar Jihad). It's role in fomenting communal violence in the province of Maluku, and its state terrorism in provinces such as West Papua, make it a dubious partner in any counter-terrorist operations. Attempts by Canberra to re-engage Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus), justified on these grounds, has been sought for some time despite the obvious ethical contradiction and domestic public discomfort.

Model Muslim state?

The successful investigation and prosecution of the Bali bombers temporarily assuaged doubts in the West about Jakarta's commitment to counter-terrorism. However, cooperation between Indonesia and the West on the 'war against terrorism' is showing serious strains.

Humiliated by Washington's refusal to share Hambali — an Al Qaeda and Jema'ah Islamiyah (JI) operative — Megawati told the United Nations General Assembly on 24 September 2003 that the war against Iraq was alienating Muslim youth from the West. It had produced a 'climate of violence' that boosted anti-Americanism, and was increasingly seen by Indonesians as a war against Islam. These words will have confirmed the West's fears about Jakarta's unreliability.

Megawati's criticism of the West at the UN General Assembly, and the doubts shared by many in her administration over the extent of their domestic Islamist problem may be driven by declining popularity and the prospect of a presidential election in the middle of 2004. However, it also suggests a return to the climate prevailing soon after the 11 September attacks when senior government officials, including the Vice President, expressed sympathy and understanding for Al Qaeda. Despite the Bali trials and the Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta, Megawati and her government remain in denial about JI. Significantly, her refusal to attend the 12-month anniversary commemoration in Kuta was a clear snubbing of the Australian Prime Minister.

The public relations campaign for the model Muslim state has stalled. In the eyes of the West, Indonesia has again become the weakest link in the anti-terrorist chain.

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