

INDONESIA'S OBAMA, WASHINGTON'S INDONESIA

Donald K. Emmerson
<emmerson@stanford.edu>

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Jakarta, Indonesia—"When will he come?" Again and again in this city I have been asked when US President Barack Hussein will visit Indonesia. I cannot remember a time, since my first trip here in 1967, when Indonesians have looked forward more eagerly to hosting an American president.

No Shoes

Hillary Clinton's visit in February 2009 not only stoked local hopes of welcoming her boss. It was a big success in its own right. Never before had an American secretary of state traveled to Jakarta so soon after taking office. Long accustomed to being overlooked by Washington, Indonesians were flattered.

Secretary Clinton voiced admiration for Indonesia's ability to combine Islam with democracy and modernity. Her host liked that. Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda spoke warmly of a new "partnership" with the United States. His guest liked that.

President Barack Hussein Obama, when he comes, will bring with him his memories of childhood in Jakarta, his accent-free facility in Indonesian, his Muslim-sounding name, and his willingness to reach out to the world in a way that his predecessor in the White House never could. Indonesians like him.

Unlike then-President George W. Bush in Baghdad in December, Hillary did not have to dodge thrown shoes. An Indonesian official laughed at the very idea that it might have been necessary to warn local journalists to keep their footwear to themselves.

As for Obama, during the US presidential campaign, a BBC poll had Indonesians preferring him to his rival John McCain by a margin of more than 4 to 1. Across 22,000-plus respondents in Asian or Pacific countries, only Australians were more pro-Obama. Indonesian photographer Ilham Anas's uncanny resemblance to the US president was enough to make Anas an instant celebrity here.

When I reverse their question by asking Indonesians "When *should* Obama come?" they nearly always say "Soon!" It is I, not they, who caution against an American president dropping by at such an intensely political time in their country.

As I write, thousands upon thousands of candidates from more than three dozen parties are campaigning for some 16,000 legislative seats at provincial, district, and city levels, 550 seats in the national legislature, and 132 seats in the country's upper house. On 9 April up to 170 million eligible voters will mark ballots to refill these bodies. On 8 July and again, if needed, in a run-off election on 8 September, millions of Indonesians will return to the polls to choose a president and a vice-president for the next five years.

November is Nice

Obama should not come to Indonesia now. Not in the middle of this Year of Politicking Vigorously. Incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) is campaigning hard for re-election. The stakes are as high as the competition is fierce. Hosting the leader of the world's most powerful country would arouse SBY's opponents to accuse Washington of interfering in domestic Indonesian politics. One hard-line Islamist group has already slammed SBY as "America's pet."

It was once thought that Obama might visit Indonesia early in his presidency. He plans instead to travel, in April, to Turkey. The most appropriate window for his trip to Indonesia will open in November, either before or after he attends the summit of leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Singapore in the middle of that month. Singapore is only slightly more than an hour by air from Jakarta.

By November, Indonesia's electoral cycle will be over, partisan tempers should have cooled, and a new government will be in place to receive and host Obama. On the US side, insofar as recession-weary Americans may expect their president to be focused on economic matters, the "E" in APEC will help the White House justify his trip.

Forging a "new" American-Indonesian "partnership" is likely to be a theme of Obama's visit to Jakarta. Good relations with Indonesia are hardly new. The US has long been, and remains, widely engaged in Southeast Asia. But if engagement between people augurs the would-be permanence of marriage, engagement between countries is contingent and requires constant reassurance.

Indonesia's need for reassurance is heightened when the other party is a distant and globally committed superpower prone to fits of distraction by crises and concerns elsewhere. Jakarta's need is further intensified when another big and powerful country—China—is permanently nearby, not far out of sight and never out of mind. Traditionally among foreign-policy realists here, Washington's indifference has helped sustain a kind of low-level anxiety over long-run Chinese dominance and Indonesian dependence.

Obama's ascent has already reduced this concern, and his actual arrival will shrink it further. Policymakers in this city are not so naïve as to think that the US president's childhood years here have made him wholly or forever pro-Indonesian. But in local eyes, the fact of Hillary Clinton's visit and the prospect of Obama's are clear and welcome signals of Washington's desire to upgrade its ties with Jakarta.

On 8 March Chinese vessels harassed an American intelligence-gathering ship in disputed waters south of China's naval base on Hainan island. I asked a panel of Indonesian defense-policy analysts and officials whether they supported Beijing's or Washington's view of the incident. Publicly, they were noncommittal. Others in Indonesia's defense establishment, however, implied privately that regional security was being served, not undermined, by American monitoring of Chinese submarines. It is not widely realized that the US and Indonesian personnel take part in more than a hundred instances of defense and security cooperation every year.

Beyond Photo Ops

There are differences between Jakarta and Washington as to how their ties should be improved. The Indonesian side wants a “comprehensive partnership” to be announced in a joint statement by the two presidents, SBY and Obama. The statement’s details would then be filled in by mid-level officials in Jakarta and Washington. In contrast to this top-down approach, the American side is more comfortable negotiating upward—deciding on the details first and then treating them as building blocks of enhanced bilateral engagement.

The planning and timing of the partnership will be affected by the results of this year’s elections in Indonesia. The presidency is SBY’s to lose. Conventional wisdom views him as a shoo-in for re-election, perhaps even in the first round of voting for president and vice-president on 8 July. Between now and then, however, the global economic crisis could damage Indonesia enough to boost his rivals’ chances. In months to come, the less likely SBY’s continuation in office appears to be, the more tentatively will Jakarta and/or Washington approach their proposed partnership.

There is, in any case, still time and opportunity to reach agreement by November on both the principles and the specifics of cooperation. SBY and Obama will meet at the G20 summit in London in early April, and bilateral advisory discussions are planned for mid-April in Washington.

As these conversations begin, some things are already clear regarding the US president’s trip. Thoughtful Indonesians are not interested in merely serving as extras in news footage of Obama smiling and waving to cheering crowds. They want the partnership to have substance. Development assistance, including especially cooperation on education, figures high on the list of Indonesian priorities. So does the Middle East. Makers and analysts of foreign policy join moderate Islamist politicians here in hoping that, before coming to Jakarta, Obama will have taken concrete steps, however modest, toward an eventual two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That said, the symbolics of Obama’s visit will matter. Indonesian enthusiasm for him is real and widespread. But his meteoric rise in local esteem reflects in part just how low America’s image sank under his predecessor. Indonesian-language books on sale here that focus on America as opposed to Obama are overwhelmingly, even polemically, critical of US actions and motives. In *Goodbye, Bush!* the Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at Obama’s predecessor in Baghdad is praised for standing up to “American arrogance and hegemony.” Another paperback exalts Iranian President Ahmadinejad as a courageous David braving the savage megalomania of the American Goliath. *Deadly Mist* claims Washington purposely engineered deadly epidemics such as AIDS, SARS, and avian flu. Anti-Semitic literature that demonizes Israel as an attack dog of Washington in its putative war on the Muslim world is also available for sale.

Yet these titles are outnumbered by a raft of short, quickie books that laud Barack Obama, while a smaller genre specializes in celebrating his wife Michelle. Typical of these hagiographies is *Obama: American President and Child of Menteng*. (Menteng is the Jakarta neighborhood where he lived in 1967-1971 between the ages of six and ten.) Among the admiring “facts” about Obama listed on *Obama*’s cover are that he “was once

an Indonesian citizen” and that, as president, he “will stop the policies and actions that have destroyed the moral authority of America.”

Wishful Seeing

It is not entirely facetious to suggest that observers of Obama’s run for the White House in 2008 and SBY’s campaigns for the State Palace in 2004 and 2009 should be forgiven if at times they forgot which country they were in. The Democratic Party of Obama is nearly identical in name to the Democrat Party of SBY. On American television last November, the states that voted for Obama were colored blue to distinguish them from the red states that went for McCain. SBY’s chosen campaign color is blue, in contrast to the red posters, flags and t-shirts preferred by his chief competitor for the presidency, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Obama’s campaign slogan in 2008 was “Yes We Can!” SBY’s 2004 presidential campaign motto was “Together We Can!”

Such parallels drove one leader of SBY’s party, Anas Urbaningrum, to hope that the Democratic Party’s “blue victory in America in 2008 will, Allah willing, be followed by a victory for the Democrat Party in Indonesia.” (Not to be outdone, SBY’s rival Megawati said she was driven by her own “Obama spirit” to “do the best for the Indonesian people.”)

Indonesians are well aware that Obama is the first American president with, as they put it, “black skin,” and this breakthrough, too, has inspired local analysts to draw local lessons. SBY is Javanese. Javanese are the country’s largest but by no means its only ethnic group. Traditionally their political influence has been more or less comparable to that of Caucasians in America. Political scientist Mohammad Qodari has gone so far as to argue that Obama’s success and popularity in the US have helped Indonesians to rethink and abandon the prejudicial notion that their own president has to be a Javanese.

The subjective appropriation of Obama’s iconic image and success to serve domestic Indonesian uses stands in dramatic contrast to the invisibility of the world’s fourth most populous country to most Americans. Nevertheless, inside the Beltway that encircles Washington DC, SBY’s Indonesia is being used by policy influentials to justify hopes and allay fears that are distinctively American in character.

When American public figures praise Indonesia as a “moderate Muslim democracy,” or use other words to that effect, they are satisfying a characteristically American need for reassurances: that Islam really is a moderate religion; that Islam and democracy are compatible; and that the one country with more Muslims than any other is now an apparently stable and successful democracy.

If Indonesians have embraced Obama as a not-Bush, Indonesia is to Americans a not-Iraq—or, insofar as the locus of quagmire may have shifted from Baghdad to Kabul, a not-Afghanistan. If Obama’s success serves Indonesian purposes, Indonesia’s success serves American ones. Appropriation turns out to be a two-way street.

One may even discern in this symbolic American cooptation of SBY’s Indonesia an echo of the American appropriation of an earlier Indonesia—the one ruled for more than three decades by President Suharto. That regime was autocratic and corrupt, but it was also

politically stable, economically dynamic, and notably anticommunist. For those in Washington who supported and prosecuted the war on communism in Southeast Asia, Indonesia became a reassuring not-Vietnam. Indonesia was even used to justify the Vietnam war with the self-serving and solipsistic argument that, absent the American effort to crush communism in Indochina, Suharto would not have been emboldened to do so in Indonesia.

Objectively, Indonesia and America differ greatly. When it comes to subjectivity, however, each one tends to see in the other what, for its own home-grown reasons, it would like to see. This is normal and, in principle, helpful. There is nothing wrong with reassurance. In months to come, however, if and as Indonesian and American negotiators proceed to shape a “comprehensive partnership” between their two countries, they would do well to monitor and limit the distance between what one partner really is and what the other partner wishes it to be.

Donald K. Emmerson heads the Southeast Asia Forum at Stanford University. He is a co-author of Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam (Stanford University Press, November 2009) and Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism in Southeast Asia (Stanford / ISEAS, 2008).