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# Understanding Indonesia

Ian Ingleby<sup>1</sup>

Indonesia's recent execution of two Australians, both convicted drug traffickers, has strained relations between our two countries. Why should this be so?

Many Indonesians would support reforms to their capital punishment laws, providing change was not noticeably influenced by outsiders. Local leaders know this perfectly well.

This does not necessarily exclude our well-intentioned support. But it does demand our understanding of, and sensitivity to, the characteristics of Indonesian life, particularly Indonesian decision-making and thought processes, and their concerns about territorial vulnerability and internal security. Our influential groups, too, know this perfectly well.

Outside observers are aware also of Indonesia's brief and disturbing history. Indonesia has had to handle extreme political, ideological and social events, most significantly the 1964-65 killings of more than 250,000 civilians by civilians,<sup>2</sup> apart from more recent conflicts and killings of up to 10,000.

Nonetheless, Indonesia is not simplistically brutal, despite a telling quote from a prominent un-named Indonesian on the cover page of Theodore Friend's book, *Indonesian Destinies*: "How can such gentle people as we are be so murderous?" – a reference to the 1964-65 killings and others.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless, some peculiar policy initiatives have been introduced, such as Suharto's PANCASILA (five principles) which supported its democratic and secular stance within the Muslim world – yet Indonesia houses more Muslims than the entire Middle East. Despite international objections to its transmigration policy, some observers believe the policy was well-intentioned, just poorly implemented and largely corrupted.

Developing its own way, sometimes with international support, occasionally in a bloody fashion, often mistake-prone, and not infrequently inviting corruption, has resulted in an administrative and social culture involving tradition and religion, as well as Western and Eastern political practices, not all highly desirable. Development could hardly have been more complex, and remains so to an extent.

To be necessarily simplistic, this seems to mean many things, including **sensitivity to issues we take for granted and surprise at our sensitivity to issues they take for granted**. In behavioural terms, **what is tolerable to one is intolerable to another**.

In the current political context, President Joko, coming from outside the TNI (Army), is seen locally and interna-

tionally as a good thing. Had Prabowo (47 per cent) won the presidency instead of Joko (53 per cent), some believe the administration may have reverted to the early part of Susilo's (SBY) leadership – not the latter part which was toned down in nearly every respect to the probable concern of the TNI and the delight of Australia.

No one really seems to know Joko. Some believe his strength is Megawati (Sukarnoputri) whose interests are known. The fact that Jusuf Kalla is Joko's deputy is regarded highly favourably nearly everywhere. Kalla supported SBY in the earlier elections and was actually ahead of SBY but declined to accept because his platform was to get rid of corruption. Had he shown an intention to accept the leadership, some believe his lifespan may have been short. Now, safe in the background, he seems a sound and moderating influence for this large and diverse democracy that is increasingly Islamic and even nationalistic in nature.

Prior to the execution of the two Australians, *The West Australian* newspaper reported that Probowo agreed to support Joko if clemency were granted. The paper suggested that the result may have been that Joko, Prabowo, Kalla and Megawati would have been as one on this matter and perhaps others .... but there are others who suspected that the offer was a trap.

History has shown a degree of paranoia in Indonesia about being surrounded by potential enemies – China, and now Malaysia and the Philippines, if they are unable to control their militants. And there may be a degree of disguised discomfort with us. The United States is remote, although it positions itself surprisingly on the periphery. This paranoia seems to be changing, but remains confusing because Indonesia is concerned about control of its 17,000 plus islands, but has a record of acquiring territory. Notwithstanding, Australia values the relationship greatly as it is a block against the unpredictability and instability of countries to the north, quite apart from its mutual economic benefits. Our defence, security and border arrangements with Indonesia are crucial.

Even so, recognition of our differences is important. Some believe what is not said is important. There is an old Javanese saying: "You meet a stranger with a smile on your face and your hands behind your back." The meaning is that the stranger does not know what you are thinking and cannot see your weapon. The same instinct applies often in international diplomacy, but our proximity to, and years of association with, Indonesia make it evident here.

As for the death penalty, many believe there will be no change soon. Singapore has shown it works. China and other Western-oriented Asian countries hold to it. And the recent publicity has served to highlight the consequences of dealing in drugs. Also, Australians who described the recent individuals as making a 'mistake', did their cause no favours. The issue is losing its heat and the Indonesian Ambassador's comments soon after the executions were moderating, well-conceived and settling.

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<sup>2</sup>CIA statistics – Australian and Indonesian statistics are significantly lower.

<sup>3</sup>Friend, Theodore (2003). *Indonesian Destinies* (Belknap Press: Harvard).