



## GOVERNANCE AND DOMESTIC POLITICS IN INDONESIA **CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES & ACHIEVEMENTS**



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Indonesia until recently, was the product of two dictatorships, the first being Soekarno's Guided Democracy, which officially began in 1959 after her first and only elected Parliament (until then) was suspended. This was followed by a second dictatorship under Soeharto's New Order, which lasted thirty two years until it was brought down in 1998.

Under both dictatorships, governance was strongly centralized (of course), but there were differences too, notably in the role of the military: under Guided Democracy military power was kept in check by the Communist Party acting as a counter weight to it (with Soekarno as the balancer between them), whereas under Soeharto's New Order, the military became more obtrusive and acquired an officially sanctioned socio-political

role (known as *dui fungsi*). Both dictatorships kept Islamic forces in check (except in the transition years between 1966-67 when it suited Soeharto to unleash the Nahadlatul Ulama against the "communists" and ,hand in glove with the military, to destroy 500,000 mostly innocent people).

This extended dose of dictatorship in Indonesia retarded Institutional growth during the New Era when, apart from the Executive and such Institutions as were necessary to support the economy such as a Central Bank, a Stock Exchange or an Investment Promotion Board, "normal" organs of State such as an independent Legislature, a Judiciary, a Free Press etc failed to develop. The question of more elaborate Institutions such as an Election Commission, Human Rights Commission, Anti -Corruption Commission, Constitutional Court etc. naturally did not arise!



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### SOUTHEAST ASIA RESEARCH PROGRAMME (SEARP)



## I CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

But today, only fifteen years after Soeharto's departure, Indonesia already has a very robust Presidential Democracy with a popular twice elected President, an incredibly dispersed system of devolution of powers from the Center to more than 440 Regencies, an elected Central Legislature (DPR), a second Legislative Body for lower Administrative Units (DPRD), a 128 member Regional Representative Council (DPD) or Upper House, a Judiciary, a strong Anti Corruption Agency, several Independent Watchdog Agencies and the freest Press in Asia!

How did Indonesia achieve all this and so quickly?

The answers to this intriguing question are many, but one answer at least lies in the strong sense of nationalism which Indonesia's intelligent leaders forged from as early as 1927. They invented a common national language (Bahasa Indonesian) to replace the hundreds of languages and dialects which were then in use and within a few years of Independence, ensuring that every Indonesian man and woman became literate in it!

Other contributing factors were Indonesia's traditionally egalitarian culture of Gotong Royong (which roughly translates into Heave ho and pull together!); the innate resilience of an

agricultural people which has seen them cheerfully pull through the most horrendous crises both natural and manmade; an eclectic brand of Islam, the product of Hindu, Buddhist and animist sources which remains moderate today (despite the filtering away of many of its unique cultural characteristics) and the major contribution of its civil society institutions.

Two of the above in particular stand out: the Mohammediah and Nahadlatul Ulama, which together enjoy a membership of over 70 million, have been providing extensive support services through free education, health care, relief and rehabilitation etc through thousands of boarding schools, colleges, hospitals and maternity homes across Java and Sumatra.

Indonesia's healthy gender relations have also contributed much to the people's poise and absorptive capacity. In urban areas, large manufacturing establishments, etc, women (despite Islam) constitute the work force almost equally as men and enjoy much more control over their lives and livelihood than do women in South Asia generally, or India in particular.

Although Soeharto kept levels of education deliberately low for people not to pose a challenge to his dictatorship, by universalizing primary and secondary education, he did ensure that education itself was widespread. This helped to foster among Indonesians a remarkable degree of fraternity which we often miss in India. Over the dictatorship years, therefore and under its seeming stagnancy, the Indonesian people were gradually moved away from rural ignorance and superstition (and a strong tradition of blind hero worship) towards becoming law abiding citizens as befits a modern and rapidly urbanizing country.

The result was that when the opportunity came to overthrow Soeharto and re

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establish democracy in 1998, Indonesians (unlike the Arabs who seem to be failing to meet the expectations of their Spring of two years ago) were equal to the challenge!

## II CHALLENGES & PROBLEMS IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

Of course, there are many problems still, some a hangover from the past, others a product of democracy itself. The most serious problem, is the lack of a Federal tradition. Strong centralization not only of financial power but also of cultural rights to self expression (of the kind India was able to foresee and equip herself for through devolution of powers to linguistically based States) has resulted in a somewhat underdeveloped sense of identity at the grassroots.

Leaders like Hatta and Syahrir, knowing well that a country of Indonesia's size and diversity requires the exploration of differences instead of uniform homogeneity had desired a Federal structure for Indonesia but, suspecting the Dutch Settlement of Independence of 1949 as being a ploy to give the departing colonizer a handle to continue to meddle in Indonesia's internal affairs, they delayed its implementation. Unfortunately, if they had hoped to revert to a Federal system a few years later after consolidating their grip on the country, this did not happen, for Soekarno was not instinctively democratic and, when he overthrew Indonesia's elected Parliament to announce Guided Democracy, he also dissolved the Constituent Assembly which was expected to institutionalize a federal structure for Indonesia.

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during the New Era.

Inventing a common language had undoubtedly been the right strategy (and a brilliant one) for a geographically fractured country of 17000 Islands, especially as Indonesia also had to fight a bitterly contested Revolution with the Dutch before her Independence was recognized. But the absence of a truly federal polity (by which perhaps local languages could have been retained alongside Bahasa Indonesian) resulted in a certain amount of damage to the Indonesian psyche. This failure, coupled with deliberate neglect of higher education by Soeharto (and the military culture he promoted), resulted in the peoples' lack of self confidence and inability to articulate their own condition especially in the presence of foreigners. But democracy and globalization require people to take charge of their own political future, not rely (for example) on the UNDP's office in Indonesia's Parliament to prepare position papers for Parliamentarians!

Fortunately this practice has been recently stopped. Indonesia today spends 30 percent of her GDP on education (a high ratio as compared with most countries), which should soon wipe out the country's twin deficits of higher education and English language skills. India's education market is a big draw for Indonesia who's Embassy in New Delhi has recently acquired a post of Education Attache to tap into it. But the

number of Indonesian students in India remains small (only 200 -250 out of a total of 30 000-40 000 Indonesians studying abroad). India's Government should address this problem in a generous spirit under the India-Indonesia New Strategic Partnership of 2005 now, when Indonesians may still appreciate the help they receive.

Apart from emphasizing higher and better quality education, the Indonesian government has, since 2001, decentralized all functions except defense, external affairs, justice, monetary matters and religious affairs and supported them with a commensurate budget, bureaucracy and elected representatives. Indonesia has thus changed, in the post Financial Crisis years (the Reformasi years) from being the most centralized large country in the world to the most decentralized!

Unfortunately, due to lingering fear of secession which continues to haunt Indonesia, financial and administrative power was not passed on to the 33 Special Districts and Provinces which would have been easier to manage, but to 440 individual Regencies and Municipalities! The result has been chaotic for the performance of the 440 local governments has been very uneven. A few of them, lead by able and honest people, are doing well but in general dishonesty and corruption has increased. The Corruption Eradication Commission of Indonesia has charged, convicted and jailed hundreds of local government

officials and elected representatives (and thus contributed to the strengthening of the rule of law in Indonesia), but the President's task is not made easier when he/she is required to cajole, manipulate and mobilize 440 local Governments.

President SBY is personally still loved and respected, but his inclusion of representatives from every party small or big, in his Cabinet and his tendency to consult them on every issue has given the impression of indecisiveness and almost paralyzed governance. SBY is criticized for unnecessarily following a policy of rigorous consensus building across parties, unnecessary because he had won a clear and massive mandate in 2009 and also because he has no more elections to contest after 2014!

A problem, which has arisen out of democracy itself, is religious intolerance\*. After Soeharto's removal, the long period of sectarian calm was shattered with 50 terrorist attacks recorded in Aceh, East Timor, Kalimantan, Poso, Ambon and Jakarta between 1998- 2001. Some of these (Aceh, East Timor and Papua) were insurgencies, while others were directed against Christian migrants who had been brought in as settlers under the earlier regime's transmigration policy and hence essentially economic. But in 1999, when the Istiqlal mosque in Jakarta was bombed, followed by the Stock Exchange in 2000 (April) and when on Christmas eve of 2000, 38 bombs were set off against Christian targets in 11 cities, the *Jemmah Islamiah*, a terror organization with pan regional ambitions was for the first time, held culpable. Islamic terror had become a chilling reality in Indonesia!

After 9/11, came the Bali bombings (and more bombings later, in Jakarta) which were seen as directed primarily against Australia for its "betrayal" in East Timor, but several Indonesians were killed too. An organization called *Lashkar Jihad* which had been sending hundreds of

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“holy warriors” openly to fight Christians in Maluku, was immediately closed down. Later it was confirmed that it had been aided by Indonesia’s military (and some prominent politician- cronies of the former President) who were unhappy with the ongoing democratic reforms!

A new terror outfit, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), was set up by an Indonesian of Arab descent and began organizing attacks on places of “western immorality” such as bars, gambling dens, massage parlours, discotheques etc. In 2002, advocates of Islamisation were defeated in another attempt (the fourth one since 1945), to introduce Shariah laws into Indonesia’s Constitution. FPI then expanded its target to the Ahmadiyahs, a “deviant” sect with about 200,000-500,000 followers believed to have originated in India. Just before the 2009 elections, on the recommendation of Indonesia’s powerful Ulama Council, the Ahmadiyah were banned by the Attorney General from spreading their message to “prevent restlessness in the Muslim community.” Simultaneously, the Government also pledged not to persecute them. When some moderates protested the ban, the Government moved to arrest the extremists who attacked them. A kind of “parity” between moderates and extremists was thus demonstrated by the Government but the ban itself was not seriously questioned.

The logic of democracy does unfortunately create an atmosphere for atavistic behavior to thrive in and Indonesia’s story is neither new nor possibly quite over yet. There are of course some positives: despite dire predictions, the prosecution of “Islamic” terrorists was carried out by the Indonesian police and Intelligence agencies with quiet efficiency and admirable rigour. The world has admired the speed of conviction of several master minds of terror and the fact that the Bali bombers were hanged in an Islamic

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country under its own laws is no doubt commendable. Prominent Indonesians have openly called the FPI “thugs in Arab robes” and the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, rivals otherwise, have joined hands to work against their tactics. As a result, the 2009 election verdict saw a decline to 27.8 percent of the vote in support of Islamic Parties which in 2004 had been as high as 38.1% . Also, the secular-nationalist parties increased their vote share, thus offering a ray of hope for a secular future.

Indonesian Islam itself however, is undergoing a deeper metamorphosis. A large number of Regencies have introduced Shariah laws . Muhammadiyah has, under present Chairman Din Shamsuddin, declared secularism, liberalism and pluralism as un-Islamic and Muslims are forbidden from marrying non Muslims or to engage in joint prayers with them. Abdurrahman Wahid, former head of NU and a great liberal himself, used often to express unhappiness at the extremist views being propagated in NU’s boarding schools but he has unfortunately passed away.

Indonesia’s Abangan (the follower of Java’s hybrid Islam with Hindu Buddhist Animist roots) long under pressure to change his religious beliefs but repelled by Islamic extremism, had become a ready convert to Christianity and it seems that it is to prevent such conversions that attacks on churches have increased in Indonesia. A report of

the US State Department in 2008 declared the Government's move against Ahmediah to be a "significant exception" to the respect for religious freedom in Indonesia but India, consistent with her policy of non interference, has not reacted to these developments. Clearly it is in her interest to do so not only because Abangan/Ahmediah beliefs represent the composite culture which Indians profess to value, but more significantly because India's security is likely to be more immediately threatened by religious extremism in Indonesia than the USA's!

### III CONCLUSION

A big success story in Indonesia has been the quiet and efficient manner of reduction of the role and importance of the military but much still remains to be done. From having a say in all Executive Departments, a guaranteed number of seats in Parliament and an expansive base which included the police forces, Indonesia's military today no longer enjoys reserved seats in Parliament. Its numbers have shrunk as the Police has been drawn out of it and none of the Executive Departments (except in the Ministry of Defense) has a military representative attached to it any longer. However, what remains to be dismantled is the Territorial Command Structure under which a parallel Military administration is present in the Regencies and at local levels.

Also, the military's commercial operations

including its various lucrative cooperatives continue with only some marginal reduction and 70 percent of military funding is still "off Budget," that is from unofficial sources! As the hold of the military increases with distance from the National Capital and the country's periphery is also where a lot of her mineral, forest and marine wealth lies (read: Aceh, Papua, Kalimantan) the resultant mix of corruption and environmental exploitation abetted by local Governments and the Military acting hand in glove with foreign companies is a major concern, especially now that with devolution of financial powers, as much as 70 percent of locally generated wealth can be retained locally. Dismantling the Territorial Command structure and weaning the military off its habituated "off Budget" revenues is vital for Indonesia if it is to have the well equipped and professionally respected Military force it desires.

Cooperation with India's Defense Ministry under a Defense Agreement signed in 2001 (ratified in 2006) has started making progress after initial foot dragging. Defense Minister Anthony was in Indonesia last year, while his counterpart is expected to come to India in 2013. Indonesia is today the world's largest archipelago but smallest Defense spender, but this image is set to change over the next few years. India should expect defense cooperation with Indonesia to increase in step with her unfolding ambitions.

*\* Indonesia is familiar with Islamic terror from the 1950s when the Dar ul Islam , who wanted the Pancasila Constitution replaced by the Jakarta Charter (essentially Shariah law ) had over taken parts of West Java and Sumatra . In their book "Subversion as Foreign Policy" George and Audrey Kahin have recounted CIA's active role in the PRRI rebellion.*

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