



BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND CHAOS

Indonesia at a Crossroads

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Courtesy of Author

Batak child in northern Sumatra

Our presence in the Asia-Pacific permits us to engage in South-east Asia through military exercises as well as the native communities. In Indonesia, we interact with the armed forces in command post/field exercises and occasionally in limited civil action projects that further support the legitimacy of the local and national authorities. However, as we execute these yearly commitments in this strategically imperative nation, which occupies some of the most important gateways of global trade, unrest and instability grow.

Indonesia is the largest archipelagic nation in the world, consisting of more than 15,000 islands that are home to 6 major religious groups, 300 ethnicities, and over

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700 linguistic communities. Indonesia is also home to the largest Muslim population in the world, with a substantial majority following the Sunni tradition. Since 1945, Indonesia has experienced rapid and successful economic, political, and social development, which has led its economy to become the largest in Southeast Asia. This transformation led to the resignation of a ruthless dictatorship in 1998 and further established Indonesia as today's successful and only liberal democracy in Southeast Asia as well as the only regional member of the G-20. As a result of these milestones, the country has been commended as a role model and possible conduit for peace and democracy for fellow Muslim nations and the region. Unfortunately, the successes of this young democracy have had a high price, as years of bloodshed and the near balkanization at the turn of the century have shown.

Indonesia's postdictatorship transition was marred with economic turbulence in the aftermath of the Asian Economic

Crisis of 1997, which fueled the 1998–2002 ethno-religious communal conflicts resulting in nationwide carnage. Since then, several government actions led to the recovery of the Indonesian economy, enforced the peace between warring factions, and strengthened the democracy.

However, Indonesia is experiencing a new rise of violence as its traditional terrorist organizations such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) continue to weaken and disappear. This terrorist activity is not receiving the same degree of international media coverage as the Jakarta and Bali bombings (2002–2009), although it presents a new and greater danger to national and regional stability. In fact, aspects of this new trend are more deeply rooted in the historical phenomena of this archipelagic nation. As the United States pays closer attention to the events of the Arab Spring, while winding down the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, this vital portion of world is slowly slipping into instability.

Can our regional engagements support the stability and security of Indonesia and further secure global trade in its national waters? Can we provide these forces with the tools to prevent another nationwide ethno-religious conflict? Are we sharing lessons from our nation's reconstruction experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq? Can we further enhance our bilateral engagements with civil-military training from which we can both prosper?

This article discusses this emerging threat in Indonesia, as well as its potential catastrophic effects in the Asia-Pacific and the world. To present my argument, I follow historical examples of Indonesia's social behavior of the colonial period and recent past and compare them with more recent events. Furthermore, I propose several ways that our expeditionary forces and interdepartmental efforts could mitigate these rising challenges and support a continuum of democracy in this vital part of the globe.

A Modern and Liberal Democracy

Indonesia emerged as a flourishing and modern democracy shortly after the end of President Suharto's dictatorship (1967–1998). Unlike the rest of Southeast Asia, and unlike the more recent turbulence in the Arab Spring nations, this was a swift transfer of power that led to peaceful and free elections in 1999. Furthermore, the young democracy has experienced three more such elections since then.

Freedom House ranks Indonesia as the only "free" nation in Southeast Asia in its 2010 Map of Freedom. Moreover, it stands next to three other "free" nations in the greater Far East (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan).¹ Also, per the East Asia Forum, Indonesia's present democratic status is seen as a longlasting and evolving political development rather than a temporary phenomenon.² During my in-country phase of Foreign Area Officer training, as I lived and backpacked in Indonesia, I witnessed several protests (sizable enough to halt traffic in Jakarta) demanding the resignation of important government officials. These were organized demonstrations of students as well as rival political parties and, on occasion, Islamic groups. However, unlike demonstrations by their Southeast Asian neighbors, these never led to violence, nor were they crushed by the government's use of force.

As I traveled through Indonesia's major cities and remote villages, I often listened to

open political conversations for and against the local and national governments and their officials. I never witnessed such free debates in any other Southeast Asian nation. Public expressions of government dissent are taboo in the other countries, which keeps such dialogue behind closed doors due to fear of informants and retaliation. I was a guest lecturer at Universitas Pelita Harapan, a top Indonesian university, where students often debated openly in formal and informal circles. These debates often criticized official government decisions and national policy. Following my lecture, the students openly challenged government actions regarding a host of issues including energy policy and corruption among politicians, all without fear of reprisal.

Free political expression is widely respected throughout Indonesia, as it is in the Western world. Throughout my travels, I saw homes, stores, and private vehicles decorated with governing and opposition political party advertisements. These showed obvious signs of wear and tear, which indicated they were present both leading up to and following national elections. In the remote islands of

their organizations a severe blow. However, even as the terrorists keep losing strength at the hands of government campaigns, attacks continue. These attacks are not being planned and conducted by traditional al Qaeda-linked terrorist organizations, but instead by perpetrators who are much harder to trace. Furthermore, the targets have changed from Western symbols to the domestic population, thereby becoming less attractive to the international media. Indonesia is currently experiencing a transformation of its domestic radical Islamic threat from centrally organized jihad (*jihad tanzim*) to individually pursued jihad (*jihad fardiyah*).

Jihad tanzim was easily neutralized, which accounts for the vast number of successes in the government's campaign against Jemaah Islamiyah. This type of jihad focused on attacking the Western presence in Indonesia, as evidenced by the bombings of nightclubs, hotels, and embassies. However, in recent years terrorists in Indonesia have attacked diverse places of worship and the national police force. Not only have the victims changed, but so have the perpetrators.

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eastern Indonesia, I witnessed an informal political debate between two fishermen and a local government official during their lunch break. Such conversations were lengthy and thorough, with the locals citing economic figures and making detailed references to domestic and international events. On several occasions, I also witnessed locals reinforcing and supporting the secularity of Indonesia. This became evident during debates about socially sensitive subjects such as nudity in the media, abortion, and religious activity. It was common to hear Indonesians say, "It may go against our personal morals, but Indonesia is a free country."

An Evolving Threat

From 2002 until 2009, the Western and tourist concentrations in Bali and Jakarta became the targets of several bombings at the hands of JI. As a consequence, the government embarked on an aggressive campaign to defeat transnational terrorism on its soil. These efforts led to the arrest and deaths of several important terrorist leaders, causing

In the recent past, the actors of jihad fardiyah have been individuals and small groups inspired by radical rhetoric professed in various religious and educational centers. These perpetrators are harder to track as they tend to form and operate independently. Many begin as groups of friends holding irregular meetings for developing terrorist plans and tactics and for limited training. These independent groups have been responsible for a number of attacks, including the book bombs sent to police officers and Muslim clerics in March 2011, the string of police assassinations in Java, and the April 2011 mosque bombing in Cirebon that killed 30 people. Furthermore, these new jihadist groups were the actors of the attempted Easter Serpong church bomb plot that same April, which was intended to cause mass casualties as Christian worshippers attended Easter Mass.

Per the International Crisis Group, some of these organizations are attempting to reignite old tensions from the 1998–2002 ethno-religious communal conflict that engulfed Indonesia shortly after the fall of

Suharto in 1998. It took years to decelerate this spiral of violence, and even today special measures and active government monitoring are necessary in these central Indonesian communities to maintain the frail peace. This is particularly the case in central Sulawesi and the Maluku islands, where these tensions are still very much a reality. In these two regions, communities are still segregated from each other, and illegal checkpoints where ethnicity and religion are scrutinized are still a reality. As I traveled this region in 2009 and 2010, I met several Muslims who affirmed that they had no hatred or tensions toward Christians. However, these statements were always followed by confessions that they had weapons hidden in their homes for “when they start trouble again.” These communal tensions and wounds are exactly what jihad tanzim under the banner of JI attempted to reignite. Nowadays, less organized and smaller terrorist cells or jihad fardiyah are attempting to pick up the fight where more organized jihad tanzim failed.

The Balinese Example

The Balinese society, where the Hindu population forms a vast majority over the Muslim communities, was directly impacted by the nightclub bombings of 2002 and 2005. More than 80 percent of the Balinese economy depends on tourism, but these busy resort areas turned into virtual ghost towns as a result of the attacks.³ Several nations placed restrictions or advised against traveling to Indonesia, spelling a curse on the Balinese economy.

The collapse of the Balinese tourist industry caused great losses of foreign investment. More importantly, locals who put their life savings into their tourist businesses went into ruin. Newly bankrupt entrepreneurs and tourism employees were forced to the countryside to work in the rice fields, making a fraction of their former salaries while laboring three times as hard. Several Balinese families I met described the times of 2002–2006 with gloom, recalling their family and community situations with tears in their eyes. What seemed to be the inability of the government to protect their society led to the stronger engagement of local, nongovernmental, communal security (*pecalang*).

Traditionally, it has been common to resolve disputes and even recover stolen property through local village chiefs rather than through the police. Police officers



Navy officer discusses schedules with Indonesian officers during Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training 2011 in Jakarta

U.S. Navy (Jessica Bidwell)

sometimes recommend that robbed tourists address their issues to these leaders for faster resolution. These local forces usually protect their communities when they are called on by the local chieftain; however, their “jurisdictional authority” is traditionally constrained to village lines. In the aftermath of the Bali bombings, the community deployed the *pecalang* in force to ensure the safety of the tourist industry as the local and national governments seemed unresponsive.⁴ As mentioned the *pecalang* used to service their villages without infringing on domestic governance; however, after the attacks, village chiefs and tourist industry operators forced a new unofficial agreement on the local authorities. These types of vigilante activities filled the vacuum left by the national government, further ensuring that local interests were protected with minor concern for national mandates. While the Balinese are now reaping great benefits, this type of gang activity has proven deadly throughout Indonesia’s history and recent past.

Centuries of Gang Warfare

Street justice and vigilante activity are not restricted to Bali. Similar social behavior has taken place for hundreds of years throughout Indonesia. During Portuguese colonial rule, as Lisbon focused on pacification campaigns in their richer African colonies, the employment of these gang-like groups kept a tight control over this far

corner of the empire. During the colonial era, the Dutch and Portuguese documented incidents of attacks on rival villages and colonial forces, causing severe bloodshed. Following the independence of East Timor in 1975, the Indonesian government employed these gangs to facilitate both the submission of the new republic and the Indonesian invasion. Jakarta maintained that strategy during its rule of East Timor (1975–1999) with the employment of East Timorese armed loyalist gangs. This continued after the United Nations referendum of 1999 when the Indonesian army employed these factions with the purpose of reintegrating the territory. These groups were the authors of several acts of violence in East Timor to include the Liquiça massacre of 1999.

The ethno-religious communal conflict of 1998–2002 ravaged several provinces where the absence and often the refusal of police forces to intervene (in many instances due to fear) gave way to unimpeded activity of gangs and vigilantes. This was the case in Borneo (Kalimantan) in 2000 when the native Dayaks attempted to violently expel the transmigrated Madurese, killing thousands of them as national authorities looked on.⁵ Several Dayaks I met in northeast Borneo described how Christian preachers turned to native beliefs and regular churchgoers wielded swords against the Madurese, severing their heads in the belief that decapitations provided special powers.

The Helsinki Agreement of 2005 marked the end of the Acehese conflict in northern Sumatra; however, it did not end local tensions. That was particularly the case with the Gayo and Alas ethnic minorities, which are more tightly linked to southern Sumatran ethnicities. These two ethnic groups of northern Sumatra have long been supporters of the Indonesian government while opposing Acehese separatism. The recent decision to award autonomy to Aceh without considering the allegiances and support of these two groups sparked a movement to create new provinces under the same auspices of self-determination. In the meantime, alienation and discrimination at the hands of the new Acehese government have fueled ethnic gang activity over minor revenue disputes and other financial grievances.⁶

Indonesia's Challenges

The Indonesian military and law enforcement agencies are heavily challenged due to poor equipment, inadequate training,

manpower shortages, and, most importantly, corruption. Recent history has proven that these national institutions can actually aggravate the situation when deployed. The 1998–2002 ethno-religious communal conflict in the Maluku archipelago witnessed KOSTRAD (the Indonesian Army's Strategic Reserve Command) supporting the Muslims while BRIMOB (Mobile Brigade) supported the Christians. The Indonesian government deployed these units for peace enforcement; however, it was not long before they supported warring factions, further aggravating the conflict.

Corruption is widespread in Indonesia and is a mechanism for some government officials to obtain supplemental income. As I traveled in East Java, I quickly learned that I could not simply organize transportation for six backpackers by speaking directly to vehicle owners. They directed me to the police chief, who would receive payment, segregate a generous portion for himself, and afterward direct a driver to take us to our destination. On the southern coast of the

island of Lombok, waterborne transportation in the coastal village of Gerupuk can only be arranged with a youth gang that enforces tight control. Villagers refuse to make any arrangements with Westerners because they fear violent reprisals from these youths. Any attempt to involve the police is usually met with refusal to intervene and the official reply of "It is *their* town and that is how *they* run it."

Indonesia's economic situation (even as it is weathering the current global economic crisis fairly well) shows an impartial concentration of wealth and development. While Bali and several geographical areas with natural resource concentrations experience a certain degree of economic development, there are vast regions where extreme poverty is the norm. Although Jakarta is making a tremendous effort to develop these less privileged communities, decades of deliberate negligence during Suharto's reign caused localized stunted growth. This is particularly the case of Papua and the inland regions of Indonesian Borneo, whose ethnic groups were officially

U.S. Navy (David A. Brandenburg)



U.S. Sailors and Coast Guardsmen walk behind parade in Surabaya during community service project for Naval Engagement Activity Indonesia 2010

considered “undevelopable” under Suharto’s rule. As a result, these areas have often been the origins of insurgent and secessionist movements.

Furthermore, the government presence in remote parts of the archipelago is limited and, as a result, loyalties are stronger to village chiefs. As these ungoverned spaces continue to thrive, maritime piracy becomes a viable source of income for some communities, particularly among critical straits. Up to 15 percent of global trade by volume transits through Indonesian waters, particularly energy, which is essential for our Northeast Asian partners who heavily depend on Middle Eastern oil.⁷ In 2003, 121 (25 percent) of the world’s reported maritime piracy attacks took place in Indonesian waters.⁸ In September 2010, 26 attacks were reported in Indonesia, a significant increase from 2009.⁹ In November of the same year, I traveled through the island of Sulawesi, visiting coastal towns adjacent to the Strait of Makassar along the west side of the island. The strait is bordered by the Indonesian islands of Borneo and Sulawesi, and to the north by Celebes Sea and Sulu archipelago. The area is a hotbed of insurgency, transnational terrorism, and crime. As I visited these towns, I found what seemed to be stolen navigational aids and ship radios openly for sale in several markets, many with handmade inscriptions in languages that were not Indonesian.

Conclusion

Decades of centrally organized jihad tanzim terrorism failed to accomplish what independent jihad fardiyah terrorism seems able to achieve: the reignition of ethno-religious communal conflict throughout Indonesia. These independent groups’ ongoing attacks on local government facilities and diverse places of worship are further amplifying what seems to be Jakarta’s inability to quell an existing insurrection. To these groups’ advantage, Indonesia is rich in ungoverned spaces with remotely located disenfranchised and destitute populations who are more than willing to follow an alternative to the status quo. Historical patterns of gang warfare throughout the archipelago in an environment of persistent ethnic and religious tensions are fuel for a widespread conflict. Counterterrorism campaigns have filled national prisons with radical Islamists who have a captive audience for their rhetoric.¹⁰ Consequently, convicted petty thieves

are being converted into Islamists who, upon release, are further spreading a perverted version of their faith.

Maritime piracy and human trafficking can potentially provide the finances to support these cells and possibly larger movements such as those Indonesia witnessed during the ethno-religious communal conflicts of 1998–2002. Unlike the Horn of Africa, the straits of Makassar and Malacca are situated in the national waters of sovereign nations, and any plans to deploy a foreign naval task force there would face greater global opposition. The option to employ alternative waterways as a result of continuing pirate activity would skyrocket global trade costs, further crippling the economies of our Northeast Asian partners and the rest of the world.

Interdepartmental and bilateral training with Indonesian armed and police forces at the tactical level could foment unified postconflict communities. With the assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice, we could enhance our scope with training capabilities and further support Indonesian government legitimacy at the local level. As an expeditionary force, we could exploit lessons learned from our experiences in provincial reconstruction and locally embedded teams and apply them in these postconflict environments.

Furthermore, as an interdepartmental effort, the Justice Department could enhance our civilian-military interaction and training with *democratic policing*. This should be focused on supporting police work per democratic principles, along with existing national and local rules and regulations, while actively discouraging ethnic and religious lines. Furthermore, *community policing* training could strengthen government-communal relations by empowering the civilian population to police their neighborhoods while supporting national authority. This could be accomplished through a shorter version of police training designed for unarmed civilians with national police support. Both of these training concepts should be reinforced with *human rights* training, thus building and strengthening the relationship between community and local law enforcement. Corrections interaction and training could also further improve prison conditions and mitigate the exposure of inmates to radical Islamic rhetoric, thereby halting the rapid spread of violent ideas.

Our forces in the Asia-Pacific already engage Indonesia’s forces and communities

through a myriad of exercises and localized projects. However, slightly more aggressive planning and new thinking could further solidify our bilateral engagement, consequently supporting these forces and communities and enhancing our bilateral relationship. Timely action in this region could guarantee a stable gateway of commerce and stabilize the most populous Muslim nation on earth. Our coordinated bilateral and interdepartmental efforts in Indonesia could prevent this archipelago from plunging into chaos and communal warfare once again, further threatening the stability of this critical part of the world. JFQ

NOTES

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¹⁰ Niniek Karmini, “Teaching Jihad in Indonesian Prisons,” Associated Press, June 30, 2011, available at <<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=13964153>>.