

# Indonesia's Image and Reality

DONALD E. WEATHERBEE

In 2011, nearly midway through his second term, Indonesia's first directly elected president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (popularly known as SBY), leads a nation that is globally recognized as a political and economic success story. Since the 1998 toppling of Suharto's authoritarian regime, the country, which at the turn of the millennium seemed on the verge of collapse, has overcome daunting political, economic, and social obstacles that elsewhere in the developing world have led to failed states.

Far from failing, Indonesia today has emerged as a signally important middle-power player on the international stage whose friendship and cooperation are sought by the world's greater powers. Yet, at the same time, domestic and regional problems continue to hinder the nation's progress.

## MUSLIM AND ROBUST

Indonesia would enjoy global visibility in any case as the world's fourth most populous country with some 240 million citizens. And nearly 90 percent of Indonesians profess Islam, giving the nation the world's largest Muslim population. However, while the size and religion of the population are often underlined, it is not these factors alone that make Indonesia an important actor on the international scene. It is also that this population lives in a stable political democracy underpinned by a vibrant economy.

With a GDP over \$700 billion, Indonesia has the largest economy in Southeast Asia. Bolstered by sound macroeconomic policies and strong domestic consumption, the economy achieved a real growth rate of 6.1 percent in 2010, and is headed to 6.5 percent in 2011 and a predicted 6.6 to 7 percent in 2012. With the exception of China and India, Indonesia's growth outpaces that of the other

countries in the Group of 20, of which Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian member.

Indonesia's robust economic performance led Jakarta to hope for an invitation to the summitry of the BRIC grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China) of emerging world economies. Rather than joining a possible BRIIC, Indonesia was disappointed when, in April 2011, South Africa participated in the third summit meeting of what became BRICS.

## THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE

But can Indonesia stay its economic course? In the long run, greater investment in infrastructure and education will be crucial. More immediately, there is concern that support for strong macroeconomic policies will be sacrificed to political contingencies. This seemed to be the case when SBY refused to back reformist Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati in 2010 when she collided with the political and business interests of cabinet strongman Aburizal Bakrie. The real issue was her fight against the corruption that eats away at the legitimacy of state institutions, especially the judiciary and police.

Although SBY "talks the talk" regarding reforms, he often does not "walk the walk." In many respects, his presidential style is frustrating to action-oriented reformists. It is too reductionist simply to attribute his apparent indecisiveness, temporizing, and search for consensus to his Javanese acculturation. SBY operates in a parliamentary system of 560 legislators from 9 political parties. In the 2009 elections his Democrat Party with 20.9 percent of the vote garnered 148 seats, while he as a directly elected president crushed his opponent with nearly 61 percent of the vote. SBY governs through a dingy (as opposed to a rainbow) six-party coalition, which gives him a theoretical majority of 463 seats. In fact, the other parties in the coalition often behave as a not-so-loyal opposition.

SBY's second five-year term ends in 2014, and he is constitutionally barred from seeking a third. Some degree of "lame-duckness" already seems to be setting in. Thus, in what promises to be a rela-

DONALD E. WEATHERBEE, *a fellow at the University of South Carolina's Walker Institute of International Studies, is the author of International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy (Rowman & Littlefield, 2nd edition, 2008).*

tively lengthy run-up to the 2014 election, SBY's decision-making will take place in an increasingly heated political atmosphere.

The ideal candidate choice in the presidential contest would be one that would consolidate and build on the nation's legacy of political stability, economic growth, development, and democratic and modernizing Islam. These are the components of Indonesia's "soft power" that give President Yudhoyono and his foreign minister Marty Natalegawa the confidence to lay claim openly to a greater global role, particularly through multilateral forums addressing nontraditional security issues.

SBY has even proposed Indonesia as a bridge between the West and the Muslim world. It is this Indonesia that US President Barack Obama embraced in November 2010 when he announced a new "comprehensive partnership" and hailed Indonesia as a global model of democracy and diversity. Still, within the country, concerns about effective governance remain.

## REGIONAL RESISTANCE

Indonesia's regional reality, meanwhile, does not fit with its international image. Even as Jakarta seeks to spread its soft-power wings globally, its wings are being clipped in the Southeast Asian context.

In the 10-member grouping of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia sees itself as *primus inter pares*. It has, however, not been able to give effective momentum to the Indonesian-inspired goal of creating an ASEAN security community by 2015 "ensuring that the countries in the region live in peace with one another . . . in a just, democratic, and harmonious environment." Indeed, the realization of this vision seems as remote today as when originally laid out in 2003.

In 2011, Jakarta jumped the queue and assumed the chairmanship of ASEAN before its regular turn in 2013. The ostensible reason was that 2013 would be too bureaucratically burdensome, since

Indonesia is hosting APEC (the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit) that year. Jakarta has sought to seize the opportunity to move a hesitant and faltering ASEAN toward greater unity of purpose and policy coherence. Yet Indonesia's desire to lead has met the resistance of ASEAN members who refuse to follow.

For example, every Indonesian effort, either bilaterally or through ASEAN, to engage Myanmar in a meaningful exchange on the need for democratic reform has been rebuffed. Indonesia's promise of a strong regional human rights mechanism has been thwarted. Escalating conflict between Thailand and Cambodia threatens to unravel ASEAN, and Jakarta's efforts at intermediation have been unavailing.

Indonesia, likewise, has been unable to orchestrate a unified response to China's increasingly aggressive claims and actions in the South China Sea. Absent the support of their ASEAN partners, front-line Vietnam and the Philippines have turned to the United States, which only heightens tensions and diminishes ASEAN's credibility. ASEAN's conceit that it is the lynchpin of East Asia's evolving security is undermined by the reality of a dysfunctional aspiring community with no political coherence or strategy to meet its internal and external challenges.

The disconnect between Indonesia's global ambitions and its inability to move its ASEAN partners will be magnified in coming years when Jakarta's chairmanship will be succeeded by Cambodia in 2012, followed by Brunei and Laos. And possibly Myanmar will interrupt the line in 2014, reclaiming a role it gave up under pressure in 2007. None of these successor states shares Indonesia's regional vision of peace, harmony, and democracy.

International political respect for Indonesia could be tarnished by the country's association with an ASEAN that continues to lose credibility. As Indonesia's international stature grows, its own national interest may call for a foreign policy that, while not necessarily post-ASEAN, does not make ASEAN its centerpiece. ■