

# **PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES:** **SEPARATING OUR ENEMIES** **FROM OUR FRIENDS**

*The Indonesian Ambassador Drops in to Offer Some Pointers*

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BY TOM PLATE

Los Angeles --- Know thy enemy? That's a good idea, especially for us Americans when we set out to police the world. Another good idea is to know who our real friends are. Confusion, in this age of a so-called "clash of civilizations" – where the enemy is said to be Islam – is definitely a bad idea.

So here's the question of the day: Indonesia, that far-flung archipelago in Southeast Asia that's home to more Muslims than any nation on earth – is it friend or foe?

The question is especially salient with all that's roiling in the Middle East right now, raising anew more questions about Islam. And, strategically speaking, Indonesia (right next to Singapore, that quiet but firm friend of America, and not far from Australia, that noisy but pivotal U.S. ally) straddles heavily sailed-through commercial sea-lanes. Right now, this overwhelmingly Muslim nation may be the most important country in the world that we Americans tend to know least about.

For their part, Indonesians are not keen to keep their country a secret. Not only do they feel that they have little to hide, they believe there is much to point out. Last week an Indonesian gentleman came to Los Angeles aiming to explain which side was up in Islamic Southeast Asia: That's Dino Patti Djalal, Indonesia's ambassador to Washington. And folks, as far as political salesmen go, he's a pistol.

Ambassador Djalal is not only selling the idea that Islam in its mainstream can be America's ally but also that America must become mainstream Islam's true ally. His latter point about us meeting them at least halfway is an even a harder sell in America than the former.

So what to do? The dapper ambassador says let's start with a monumental fact. "There are more Muslims in Indonesia than in the entire Middle East," the ambassador explained, to a business and academic audience at the University of Southern California's annual Asia Pacific Business Outlook. Let Indonesia be more on our minds: While virulent forms of Islam exist in Indonesia as in the Middle East, we here in Southeast Asia are on top of the problem.

Maybe the headlines from the Middle East present a bit of a distortion about Islam overall and not enough emphasis on the tolerant Islam that is eager to move forward into the modern globalized world without *jihad*-ing anybody at all. That's

precisely the current pitch from Jakarta as Indonesia offers for our inspection Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He is the country's third consecutive president elected democratically – and the first to be democratically re-elected (overwhelmingly, in fact, in 2009).

Quite far from perfect, but more than willing to be judged by his government's steady economic progress, Yudhoyono climbed to the pinnacle of power after a career in the Indonesian armed forces. That can be a scary organization, to be sure, as Western human right groups will properly point out. But we need to keep in mind that when the Dutch colonialists scampered away more than a half century ago there wasn't much left behind to keep this archipelago country stitched up – except by the potential and actual brute force of its military.

Another set of groups both adding to and subtracting from cohesion are various Muslim organizations. Large moderate ones like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) are so mainstream they produced the country's president in its first real democratic election in 1999. But others have been an utter terror, aligning themselves with al-Qaida, especially the cruel Jemaah Islamiyah. It was JI that launched those infamous killer attacks in Bali and Jakarta (Marriott Hotel) in 2002-2003.

So what will it be from Indonesia, what will you be giving us: NU – or JI?

Djalal touts Indonesia 's chances for an NU approach because so many Indonesians want to move forward; and because so many of those want to do so hand-in-hand with America. The fact of the matter is that surprisingly few Indonesians would be comfortable if the U.S. were to recede back into some shell and leave the geopolitical fate of Asia to the sole will of China. "Reclaim your self-confidence," the ambassador beseeched his Los Angeles audience, "because more people than ever out there have confidence in you."

Our U.S. media rarely brings us such a message. The picture we often get is that there's hardly even one party out there to which we're cordially invited. On the contrary, says this friend of America, at this moment the onus is not on the United States to prove to people that it's a good neighbor to Asia, it's on someone else. "China must assuage concerns," said the ambassador, flatly, even ominously.

America needs to hear more advice from Asian leaders at the obvious level-headedness of Ambassador Djalal. There are all sorts of good reasons why a mainstream Muslim/American alliance could offer almost everyone geopolitical utility.

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