Indonesia's Relations with Australia and Papua New Guinea: An Overview

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That relations between states are often full of ups and downs forms part of normal international political life. They occur even between the closest of friends and allies, and between immediate neighbours such as Indonesia, Australia and Papua New Guinea. But the fact that for the past few years Indonesia's relations with two of its most immediate neighbours, Australia and PNG, seem to have been marked more by troubles and turbulance than calm, more downs than ups, seems to merit some special attention.

This is not to suggest that Indonesia's relations with the two countries have always been characterised by more troubles than calm. But the truth is that troubles and turbulance usually tend to attract more attention than smooth relationship and are likely to incline one to ignore the fact that even while there are strains in those relations, the less dramatic and more mundane aspects of relations often continue unperturbed and unnoticed such as trade and other forms of economic and technical co-operation. However, one is nonetheless to guard against the danger that unless there are serious and conscious efforts on the part of all three countries to overcome the difficulties and ride out the resulting tensions, they might develop out of all proportions, or get out of hand and adversely affect the whole spectrum of the relationship over the long run. This would harm the interests of all the three countries and is certainly not the kind of development that any one of them would wish to see.

Indeed, while it would not do any good to the relationship to exaggerate the problems that exist, to overlook them and pretend as though nothing amiss

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happens in the relationship would not do any better. Perhaps it is fortunate that at this particular point in time Indonesia's relations with Australia as well as PNG have just reached another ascendency of warmth and cordiality, good will and understanding. Prime Minister Bob Hawke's statement last year affirming Australia's recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty over East Timor had a considerable healing effect on one of the sores that had afflicted relations between the two countries. The recent mutual visit by the Foreign Ministers of both countries within a short span of time is a reflection of the new development, especially in view of the fact that Dr. Mochtar's visit to this country near the end of last year was the first of its kind for almost a decade. And if nothing as dramatic has taken place in Indonesia's relations with PNG, at least a recent warming up of that relationship is also reflected in the fairly frequent exchange of visits by government leaders of both countries.

Such a development has certainly created a favourable political atmosphere that provides a good opportunity to ponder over not only the kinds of problems that have beset the triangular relationship between the three countries but also other factors that may have some bearing on the problems and which may be in the way of efforts at their solution, thereby exacerbating the strains. For while at least some of the problems or issues may continue to be dormant only to surface again in the future, a better understanding and appreciation of these factors may not only reduce the likelihood of such and other similar problems and issues re-emerging, but also lead to greater tolerance and forbearance and thereby reduce their possible adverse effects on the relationship between the three countries in the event of their re-emergence in the future. It may also help efforts at their solution.

That is precisely what this essay will attempt to do. It is not an attempt to deal directly with the kinds of problems and issues that have beset Indonesia's relations with Australia and PNG. Rather, it is an attempt to identify some of the factors that may have helped to create the kinds of problems and issues that have often strained Indonesia's relations with two of its immediate neighbours. Such factors often underlie the difficulties in the efforts to find proper solutions of the problems in hand. Unless these are properly understood and appreciated the kinds of problems that have arisen and may arise again in the future are likely to continue to strain the triangular relationship to the extent that may not be conducive to the further development of a closer and mutually beneficial relationship and co-operation in many fields. Given the desire on the part of the three countries to promote and maintain such relationship and co-operation, in spite of inevitable occasional strains, such an undertaking is certainly in order.

QUESTION OF PERCEPTIONS

The way states perceive of one another affects their relationship in one way or another. The way Indonesia tends to perceive of Australia and PNG would help to determine not only its behaviour and attitude towards them but also its expectations regarding Australia's and PNG's behaviour towards itself as well as towards the outside world. This is of course equally true with the perceptions of Australia and PNG regarding Indonesia. In fact, differences in the perception of one another among states, rightly or wrongly, are to be expected as a matter of course. But if not well understood, put on proper perspective, and in the case of misperception corrected with sufficient assurance, they may cause frictions and tensions in the relations between the states concerned.

Thus although undoubtedly of significance, the relative importance of Australia, let alone of PNG, which is comparatively a new comer in international politics, is understandably less than that of the ASEAN states to Indonesia for historical, cultural, political and security reasons. Under the present New Order regime in Indonesia, ASEAN has been the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy, if for some reasons the validity of this principle may be doubtful in the coming years. Indeed, it seems difficult to place Australia and PNG in the precise order of priorities of Indonesia's foreign policy. They have to compete, as it were, with the rest of Southeast Asia and the major powers. This is not to deny the fact that PNG is one of only two states (the other being Malaysia) having a common land border with Indonesia, and thus on that account alone PNG and Indonesia are very important to each other and are bound to have common problems. Nor is one to deny the fact that Indonesia's relations with Australia are constantly getting closer. After PNG, Indonesia is the largest recipient of Australia's foreign aid. And in the context of relations between ASEAN and the Pacific region through the 6 + 1 formula, Australia is not lagging behind the rest of the area. It is the sixth largest investor in Indonesia.

Indeed, while it is definitely an exaggeration to say that Australia and PNG are low in the order of priorities of Indonesia's foreign policy, there is, to the author's view, a tendency on the part of Indonesians to take Australia and PNG for granted. This is not a very nice thing to say to Australians and Papua New Guineans, but it could be considered a compliment to them in the sense that Indonesia never regards these two countries as a source of trouble posing a threat to its national security and survival. And in that sense, all the troubles in the relations between Indonesia and the two countries have perhaps served as not much more than a nuisance that has unnecessarily caused some strain in the relationship.

It seems, rather, that the Indonesian government has been a little over-reactive and oversensitive to some of the critical views expressed by certain circles in the two countries, official and unofficial alike, such as on East Timor in the past and human rights. Nevertheless, it may also be a credit to the Indonesian government in that it shows how seriously Indonesia upholds the principles of human rights, and that therefore it does not take such issues lightly.

At the same time, Indonesia's reaction and sensitivity seems to reveal another difference in perception with its two neighbours on the concept of friendship. Indonesia's concept of friendship seems to be one of totality. If it is generally regarded as a natural part of friendship to be critical, criticism, especially harsh and open criticism, is not to be expected from a true friend in the Indonesian notion of friendship. At least it is less tolerable and acceptable than that coming from ordinary or less close friends. The same criticism from the Soviet Union, for example, is perhaps less likely to provoke the same kind of reaction. Thus, in a way, Indonesia's reaction and sensitivity to some of the issues raised in Australia and PNG is an indication of its regard for the two countries as close friends.

Unfortunately, as referred to above, the friendship of these two countries, especially friendship in the Indonesian sense of the word, is perhaps too often taken for granted. An Australian ambassador once quoted an Indonesian as saying, which, is expressed in somewhat extreme terms, seems to accurately reflect this kind of attitude, that "for Indonesia, Australia's position in this region of the world is like the role of the appendix in the human body -- it has no useful function and you only pay attention to it when it hurts." So perhaps critical views of Indonesia expressed in Australia and PNG may have served a useful function after all in that they have aroused its attention. Not long ago Foreign Minister Mochtar stated that Indonesia was to "look Southeast," an attempt, probably long overdue, to pay a more serious attention to an area Indonesia had taken for granted until then. That harmless appendix has now hurt.

Indeed, there have been complaints that Australia has been the more active side than Indonesia in promoting closer relations and in trying to understand each other better. The fact that there are more Indonesian studies undertaken in Australia than Australian studies undertaken in Indonesia, for instance, if there are any, has been cited as a reflection of that lack of interest on the part of Indonesians in understanding Australia. There is, to the view of the author, a grain of truth in such complaints, although lack of interest is most probably not the only reason. One must also point out that there are hardly any studies worth mentioning in Indonesian universities and institutions on the individual ASEAN countries and the rest of Southeast Asia, not to mention external major powers such as China and the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, views often expressed in the past that there was growing feeling and awareness among Australians that Australia belongs to Asia, or more particularly Southeast Asia, and that therefore its destiny lies in this region have frequently aroused unrealistic and unfair expectations in Indonesia far beyond the intended meaning. They then seem to expect Australians to behave and to feel like Asians. Expressions of Australian personality, behaviour, way of thinking, and cultural backgrounds, which are essentially European rather than Asian, often create resentment, when the fact is that racial, ethnical, and cultural affinities often have little relevance to relations between states. For Australia to be geographically a part of Southeast Asia is certainly not in conflict with its being culturally and traditionally European, or for PNG melanesian.

On the other hand, it is hard for many Indonesians to believe and to understand that some circles in Australia, though not the Australian government, as well as in PNG, perceive Indonesia as constituting a potential source of threat to the two countries. Such a perception, as one Indonesian journalist has put it, has a "messaging effect" on Indonesia's ego, and many would simply scoff at the suggestion. However, continuous and more intensive exchange of ideas and information between the three countries is needed so as to overcome mutual ignorance and lack of understanding of each other's actions, motivation, and intentions. It is partly due to a lack of information and understanding, for instance, that Indonesia's programme of transmigration in Irian Jaya is perceived in PNG as in part being strategically motivated having an aggressive and expansionist intention toward PNG.

However, there is no substitute for the promotion of lasting good and friendly relations with both Australia and PNG, which would reassure the other two countries of Indonesia's peaceful and friendly intentions towards them. As part of a big-small power complex, a perception on the part of the two countries, particularly PNG, of Indonesia looming menacingly large across the border is likely to persist and to surface from time to time. If vague, the way Australia, or especially PNG, looks at Indonesia is perhaps not unlike the way many Indonesians look at China with its over one billion people. It is probably also related to this big-small power complex that there seems to be a difference in the degree of importance that Indonesia, with its 165 million people, and PNG, with only three million, attach to the problem of 10.000 border crossers of Indonesians from West Irian to PNG.

Related to differences in perception are differences in the concept of nationhood, particularly between Indonesia and PNG, which have caused an erroneous assessment by PNG on Indonesia's programme of transmigration in Irian Jaya. The fear or concern on the part of both PNG and Australia that the

transmigration programme involving the transfer of many Javanese -- in fact there are also non-Javanese Indonesians among them -- may pose a threat to the melanesian culture of the local population and thus a threat to PNG, as if the programme entails the imposition of "Javanese culture" on the local population is definitely misguided.

Such fear seems to stem from PNG's concept of its nationhood based as it is on the melanesian, or more particularly Papuanese culture. As far as Indonesia is concerned, however, the so-called Javanese culture, though perhaps dominant because it is that of the majority of the Indonesian population, is not the only culture that sustains the Indonesian nation. It is, rather, a part of the larger Indonesian culture, which not only comprises the melanesian culture but also one that continues to be enriched by the diverse cultural components of the different regional, ethnical, and linguistic groups that constitute the Indonesian nation. Strictly speaking, as such the Indonesian culture seems to be ill-defined. Like the Indonesian nation itself, it is a culture continuously in the making.

However, unlike the nation of Papua New Guinea, which is founded on the melanesian or Papuanese culture, the Indonesian nation did not spring from the identity of the Indonesian culture. It is the other way round. One can talk of the Indonesian culture because of the existence of the Indonesian nation, not the other way round. And the concept of Indonesian nationhood itself is a comparatively new one, beginning with the youth pledge of 28th October 1928, when the youth leaders of the Indonesian nationalist movement for national independence made a formal pledge to have one fatherland, one nation, and one national language. The concept of one fatherland and one nation sprang from a sense of common destiny in the face of Dutch colonialism.

Thus the concept of Indonesian nationhood is a political, not a cultural one. Had it been of cultural identity, the national language of Indonesia would have perhaps been Javanese, not Indonesian, which stems basically from Malay, the language of a minority, but for many years even before Indonesian independence had become the lingua franca of the archipelago, which, interestingly, has never created any resentment on the part of the Javanese. Indeed, experience in other areas of Indonesia where Javanese have resettled shows that rather than "Javanising" the local population the Javanese have undergone a cultural assimilation with the local population. Thus the suggestion about the forceful imposition of the Javanese culture, itself having been strongly influenced by diverse alien cultures, seems, to say the least, preposterous. The possibility that at the same time the local population in Irian Jaya where Javanese families are resettled may willingly absorb certain aspects of the Javanese culture, or that the Papua New Guineans across the border

may be influenced by the Indonesian culture and the other way round because of frequent contacts is to be accepted as a natural course of events, which has nothing to do with the question of imposing one culture upon another insofar as it is a voluntary process that does not involve the use or threat of force.

Indeed, a closer look at recent Indonesian history would reveal that Indonesia's policy of transmigration has begun even since before independence, that is, under the Dutch colonial regime when there was already the problem of overpopulation in Java. The problem is certainly not just overpopulation in Java but also one of uneven distribution of population throughout the country. The programme of transmigration is an attempt to solve those two problems with a view to promoting more evenly distributed national development and preserving national integration and national unity. If it has strategic significance at all it is that the objectives to be achieved through the transmigration programme form part of the efforts at the promotion of national resilience. This has certainly a security dimension, but it is not to be directed at any particular country.

HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, AND TRADITIONAL BACKGROUNDS

To some extent a nation's history, traditions, and value system also shape its patterns of attitude and behaviour. A lack of understanding of differences in such determinant factors of national attitude and behaviour between states often results in strained relations between the states concerned.

It is part of the liberal democratic tradition of Australia, for instance, as of other Western democracies, that criticisms of and disagreements with the government and its policy or a part of its policy are expressed openly and at times even harshly. This is done especially by the opposition groups through public speeches, the press and other mass media. But when such criticisms and disagreements are voiced by certain circles in Australia such as the press or some part of it and certain intellectuals directed against Indonesia, be it some aspects of life in the country, the Indonesian government, its policy or a part of it, seemingly applying the Australian experience to Indonesia, one is likely to be surprised at the kind of reaction on the part not only of the Indonesian government or government officials but also of Indonesians in general.

In the first place, it is not in the Indonesian tradition to express criticisms and disagreements, especially regarding the government, directly and openly, that is, especially in public. Contrary to a widespread Western view, this has little to do with freedom of speech and expression. The absence of opposition as an institution in the Indonesian political system may tend to reinforce this custom.

In the second place, from the Indonesian point of view not only is the way such criticisms and disagreements are expressed taken to be an indication of a lack of sensitivity on the part of Australians to Indonesian traditional regard for leaders, but such critical views are very often regarded as expressions of anti-Indonesia attitude, irrespective of their merit. And such an attitude, as referred to earlier, is not to be expected from friends.

To be sure, Australians might argue that they are only critical of the Indonesian government, or perhaps only its policy or some part of its policy; that they are not against the country and the people. Indeed, they might even say they love the country and its people. Perhaps they just happen not to like the government. But to Indonesians, what difference does it make? Especially when these things are said by foreigners, it is often difficult to draw a distinction. Making a difference between the government and the country or its people implies an accusation that the government does not represent the country and its people. This does not sound consistent with the principle of democratic government that they themselves believe in. Or else they imply that Indonesia is not practising democracy.

Indeed, as far as Indonesia is concerned, making such a distinction should be the privilege of Indonesians who, in spite of the absence of opposition as an institution, may be thinking of a possible alternative government. One may be able to draw such a distinction with regard to a foreign country, provided its government is not democratically elected. Otherwise it would be sheer arrogance.

In the third place, to Indonesians it does not seem to matter much which section of Australian society is indulging in such an exercise. It may be only some part of the Australian press; it may be a small group of intellectuals and academics; or it may be just a political party or even a wing of a political party. A critical view or attitude expressed in Australia by a section of Australian society, or perhaps even by individuals, regarding Indonesia, is not infrequently interpreted as representing the whole of the country, including even its government.

To make matters worse, its government does occasionally give voice to such critical views and attitudes. From the Australian point of view, the government, perhaps true to its liberal democratic tradition, is to take into account even the voice of a minority, although it does not necessarily mean adopting such views or attitudes itself. After all, the votes of that minority may be of some value in the next elections. At best, in the face of protests or complaints, all the Australian government can do, although it may not approve of such critical views and attitudes itself as may be expressed by some circles in Australia regarding Indonesia, is saying something to the effect that it cannot control the press, or the intellectuals, or whatever may be the case.

That is of course fair enough, as far as it goes. But to one not trained or well-versed in the practice of liberal democracy, like many Indonesians, it is something not so easy to understand. It boggles their minds.

It may also be an indication of a lack of understanding of the way liberal democracy works in Australia -- or in PNG for that matter -- that Indonesians often tend to take at face value a statement, particularly a negative one, made by some Australian or PNG political leaders, about Indonesia. That is to say, not enough consideration is given to such factors as the possible kind of pressure on the individual concerned in making such a statement that may come from his constituency, the kind of audience to whom a particular message contained in the statement is directed, and a possible link with other aspects of domestic politics.

It seems, however, that to explain the differences in attitude and behaviour between Indonesia on the one hand and Australia and PNG on the other, only in terms of differences in democratic traditions or in political systems and the resulting mutual lack of understanding, is not sufficient. It is not altogether accurate, for example, to suggest that Indonesia is not familiar with the working of liberal democracy. For more than a decade after it obtained its national independence, Indonesia has practised that kind of democracy, if only to learn the hard way that it was (and is) not the kind of democracy that suits its traditions, cultures, and needs. Thus it has never taken root in Indonesian society. It has not shaped its way of thinking or its pattern of behaviour. It is something that seems to remain alien to Indonesian sense of national identity and personality.

Moreover, Indonesia has not faced the same kinds of problems -- at least, if it has, to a far lesser extent -- with Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, three ASEAN states where liberal democracy, in their own versions, operates. It seems then that apart from differences in democratic traditions, differences in attitude and behaviour between Indonesia on the one hand and Australia and PNG on the other, may also be understood in the light of differences in their histories, cultures, and value systems. If Australia's history, culture and value system may be traced to Europe, that of PNG may be traced to Australia in their past colonial association. But while it is not true with PNG, the fact that basically Australians are historically and culturally Europeans whereas Malaysians, Singaporeans and Philippinos are Southeast Asians, in spite of their similar liberal democratic systems, seems in part to explain their differences in attitude and behaviour toward Indonesia. Among these Southeast Asians there seems to be better mutual understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity.

To point out these differences, however, is not to suggest racism or racialism, far from it. It is only an attempt to recognise differences in historical, traditional, and cultural backgrounds, which serve to explain the differences in value system, and thus in behaviour and attitude. Nor is it to suggest that these differences necessarily constitute obstacles to good and friendly relations. It is the lack of mutual understanding of these differences that is likely to stand in the way of efforts at promoting such relations.

Indeed, it seems strange that from the very beginning of its independence Indonesia started with the best of relations with Australia, one of the earliest and staunchest supporters of its struggle for national independence, for which Indonesians continue to feel deeply grateful and of which they constantly cherish the memories. Yet that close friendship turned out to be short-lived, and for a long time since then relations between the two countries had been beset with disagreement over the West Irian issue and Indonesia's confrontation policy. It is true that the relations started to pick up with the advent of the New Order in Indonesia and seems to have reached a peak with the coming to office of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. He was associated with the progressive policy of the Labour government in support of Indonesia's struggle for independence. He showed his sensitivity to and sympathy with the new nationalism and regionalism of Southeast Asia by becoming the first Australian Prime Minister to visit the region on his first overseas trip. And not less important he quickly reached an understanding with Indonesia on the issue of East Timor. But since then relations between Indonesia and Australia have admittedly been often under strain.

Indeed, it seems to be an ironical twist of history that while Indonesia started with hostility towards one close neighbour, Malaysia, then has continued ever since in intimate relationship, especially in the context of ASEAN as a manifestation of good-neighbourliness, it started with good relations with another, Australia, with whom, however, the going has often been tough since then. Hopefully, though, as some would argue, it is a sign of maturity in the relationship between the two countries.

FRAMEWORK OF RELATIONSHIP: A CONCLUSION

The present discussion has so far focussed on differences between Indonesia on the one hand and Australia and PNG on the other with respect to perception, tradition, historical and cultural backgrounds. It has not touched on possible similarities. But while similarities between states do not guarantee good relationship, differences, especially in such basic factors, may tend to cause or at least to complicate certain problems than similarities as the above analysis attempts to indicate.

Nevertheless, differences between states may not in themselves necessarily constitute obstacles to good and mutually beneficial relationship. They may even serve, to some extent, to enrich one another. What matters is the promotion of mutual understanding, appreciation, tolerance and respect for one another's differences. For once, when one talks of the relations between Indonesia with Australia and PNG, such expressions are not simply empty diplomatic rhetorics. The problems that exist are real as this essay attempts to demonstrate.

The question now is how to continuously promote and renew such mutual understanding and respect, which, after all, cannot be taken for granted. This may be done by increasing and expanding contacts between Indonesians, Australians and Papua New Guineans at all possible levels, walks of life, and fields of activities. This may entail an improvement, extension and expansion of existing forms and modes of co-operation between the three countries. Closer, wider, and more intensive co-operation will not only help to promote better understanding but it will at the same time help to enhance the viability and maturity of the relationship. The higher degree of maturity and viability of relationship would increase the ability of the three countries to ride out possible fits of tension and misunderstanding, for the three countries would each have a greater stake in the continuation and improvement than in the strain and deterioration of their relations and co-operation.

With that in view, despite unavoidable differences in certain respects, efforts may continue to be made to find wider areas of commonality and convergence of interests that would bind the three countries more strongly together. Indeed, while the three countries may not share a common strategic outlook, perception of national security, and foreign policy orientation, they certainly share a common interest in the creation and maintenance of regional stability that comprises the region of Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. And if on account of such differences they may not be involved in a regional co-operation such as ASEAN and the Pacific region, at any rate the principle of good-neighbourly relations that underlies Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN may be applied in the relations and co-operation between the three countries. Such a framework of relationship and co-operation will enable Indonesia, Australia and PNG to make a meaningful contribution to the stability and security of Southeast Asia, Southwest Pacific, and indeed the wider region of the Pacific and the world at large.