Paul Keating's recent visit to Indonesia and his pronouncements on Australia's future role in Asia are the most concrete moves any Australian prime minister has made towards strengthening relations with our northern neighbour. The government's new emphasis is clearly based on economic, political and cultural ties. But one rather large stumbling block remains—the contentious and delicate issue of human rights. The current stress on pragmatism disposes of such issues rather too conveniently.

While in Indonesia, Keating focused on commercial, social, governmental and defence ties, all of which seem set to improve under his approach. His move towards acknowledging Australia's place in the region has been long-awaited, and is certainly necessary. However, Australia is yet to fully address the problem of how to accommodate the policies of the governments of South-East Asia. Clearly, in "becoming part of Asia", Australia cannot expect dealings to be on the same level as they are with other western countries. Major differences in culture, religion and political and economic systems between Australia and the rest of Asia need to be handled by all countries concerned with understanding and flexibility.

Tension between Indonesia and Australia in the past has stemmed not from these differences, but from misunderstanding. However, journalists at least are learning to deal with contentious issues such as human rights, the presidential family and the army with more maturity and sensitivity. Jakarta is also becoming less sensitive to criticism as Indonesia itself gradually begins to tolerate greater press freedom.

But Keating's push for Australia to align itself with Asia does not mean that Australia has to adopt 'Asian' values in order to deal with those countries. Australia cannot deny its own liberal democratic history, but equally it does not have the right to impose those values on Indonesia or any other South-East Asian country. Indonesia has been quicker than Australia to recognise that both countries are valuable to one another only if they maintain their own identity.

As a result, there are bound to be certain conflicts, and the question of human rights is particularly sensitive, as the Dili massacre again highlighted. The National Investigation Committee (KPN) into the killings quelled the initial outrage expressed by most Western governments, including Australia. Its findings put the death toll at over 50, and the officers responsible were subsequently tried and sentenced. The commanders in charge of the region, Brigadier-General Warouw and Major General Sintong Panjaitan, have been replaced.

But this did little to resolve Australia's dilemma of balancing human rights and economic interests. The signing of an agreement under the Timor Gap Treaty less than a month after the Dili incident made it clear that those interests took precedence over human rights concerns. Foreign Minister Gareth Evans went so far as to pass special legislation which allowed police to remove crosses erected outside the Indonesian Embassy to mark the deaths of East Timorese on November 12. As far as he was concerned, it was simply a matter of governments having to get along with each other in international discourse. Yet the Australian government's response was in stark contrast to the furious public reaction to the Dili massacre.

Leading Indonesian dissident, Bratanata Slamat, says that one of the main problems with Australia's relationship with Indonesia is that Australia can be too accommodating: "When you decide to have relations..."
with a country, let it be good relations. But not in the sense that Australia should bend itself backwards and pretend not to know what is going on here.” Slamat points out that by compromising its own values and opinions, Australia risks losing respect in the eyes of Indonesia. “I will not mention names,” he says, “but one of your ambassadors has made himself ridiculous here in Indonesia by trying to be more Javanese than the average Indonesian. He thinks he is helping the situation. But looking at it from, let us say, an oriental point of view, we feel he should not humiliate himself like that.”

Clearly, neither this approach, nor taking a soft stand on human rights is what “being part of Asia” should mean. A more subtle attitude is required. Indonesia poet and playwright, W S Rendra, when in Australia on his recent tour, expressed well the fine line between criticism and interference: “We don’t like political pressure. It’s wrong and useless. But there is no need to give political encouragement to our wrongdoings either.” For Australia, political pressure such as the threat of stopping aid or imposing economic sanctions over Dili would have achieved nothing, nor would it in the future if a similar incident occurred. This is not simply because Indonesia clearly takes a pride in its refusal to be dictated to by other countries, but also because neither Japan (which supplies Indonesia with almost two-thirds of its aid) nor the US will pull out their economic support and investment in Indonesia.

What Australia can do is to try to encourage the Indonesian government to adopt a policy which acknowledges cultural differences and local values, not only in East Timor, but also in Irian Jaya and Aceh. Most importantly of all, Australia needs to look at human rights in the context of Indonesia’s political and economic development. Rendra stresses the need for gradual change to achieve true democracy and human rights in Indonesia: “In the process of gradual change you must still reach consensus with the elite. Because those who fight for human rights and democracy are still a minority.”

Rather than only addressing human rights issues that hit the front pages, Australia could play a more significant role in areas such as education and the improvement of Indonesia’s overworked infrastructure. Democracy and human rights are not solely dependent on political or economic change—cultural change is also fundamental, and that requires patience and assistance from countries such as Australia. Keating has made the first move at a political level. Now this needs to be followed up by a multitude of interchanges at a personal level.

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Australia’s relationship with Indonesia is predicated on the ‘stability’ achieved in the Soeharto era. As this period draws to a close, the role of Islam is one of the biggest imponderables in an uncertain future, says Steven Drakeley.

During his recent prime ministerial visit to Indonesia, Paul Keating was at pains to emphasise positive aspects of the Australia-Indonesia relationship. Accordingly, he reiterated the long-established government view that the stable and pragmatic New Order government of President Soeharto was of immense strategic benefit to Australia. But this sanguine view of the Soeharto government’s stability may shortly require reassessment because Indonesia seems to be standing at, or at least approaching, a significant crossroads.

Although the 71-year old Soeharto is almost certain to be elected unop-