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 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 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.

JULIEANNE CAMPBELL is Australian correspondent for Indonesia Observer magazine.

Inside Out

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-
posed to another five-year term when the People's Consultative Council (MPR) meets next year, his rule must be approaching its end, if only because of his age. Barely muted speculation already abounds in Indonesia as to what changes will take place when the presidency does change hands (for only the second time since independence) and whether the transition to a post-Soeharto era will be smooth or turbulent.

A large number of factors will interact to determine the direction of political developments. One of these is the pivotal role that Islamic forces could play, as they have in previous political transitions. For centuries, Islam has had an influential role in Indonesian political affairs. It would be surprising if this were not the case, given that the overwhelming majority of the Indonesian population have long professed the Islamic faith (approximately 87% according to figures released a decade ago).

Yet Indonesia is not an Islamic state. Indeed, Islam has been characterised as a political ‘outsider’ throughout its history in Indonesia, and Indonesian Muslims have been described as a ‘majority with a minority mentality’. Certainly, Islam appears to have continued to occupy a political ‘outsider’ position throughout the New Order period, despite being a crucial political midwife at its birth. But is this now about to change?

There is no doubt that in the social and religious spheres, Islam has made spectacular strides in the last 20 years, and the pace seems to be accelerating, particularly among young people. Vivid testimony is provided to the casual observer by the preponderance of young women now choosing to wear a variant of Islamic female attire, the jilbab (a headscarf which covers the hair, neck and shoulders, leaving only the face exposed). As a recent issue of the influential weekly Indonesian magazine, Tempo, acknowledged in a major article, the process of ‘santrisation’ is making great strides. (Santri is a term used to refer to those who practice a more orthodox variant of Islam, their counterparts, the ‘nominal Muslims’ are often referred to as abangan.) This process, more commonly called islamisation, can only result in Islam gaining considerable social weight. Can this increased social weight be prevented from manifesting itself politically?

Perhaps the clearest indication that it cannot, is revealed by the new stance that Soeharto seems to have adopted towards Islam. He and members of his family have taken considerable pains to display more orthodox Islamic behaviour in the last couple of years, culminating in their much publicised performance of the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) last year. This is especially significant since hitherto Soeharto was reputed to incline strongly towards Kejawen (a blend of mystical Islam and pre-Islamic Javanese traditional beliefs).

Other more tangible pro-Islam initiatives have also been taken recently. Substantial funds have been allocated to Islamic projects such as the building of mosques and other facilities, the authority of religious courts has been boosted, greater emphasis has been given to Islamic teachings in the national curriculum, Muslim girls (after years of agitation) are now allowed to wear jilbabs in school, and a government-sponsored Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) has been established, as has the country’s first Islamic-style bank.

The government was also quick to side with those Muslims who demanded action be taken against the hapless editor of the Monitor, a popular newspaper which recently ran foul of Islamic sensibilities. The editor was sentenced to five years in jail for blasphemy and the Monitor’s publishing licence withdrawn. Now, in response to these overtures, most Islamic organisations have vociferously called for Soeharto’s election to a sixth five-year term, going so far as to hold a mass prayer in the capital with that objective. Does this mean that Islam has finally crossed the threshold and become a political ‘insider’? An answer can only be attempted from a historical perspective.

Islam in Indonesia is far from being uniform. As Islam spread throughout the islands that became Indonesia, it was adapted in an interactive process with the prevailing local customs, traditions and beliefs. To a large extent, these local differences, which can be found throughout the Islamic world, are inconsequential. But for reasons which are not entirely clear there developed a cleavage within the Indonesia Islamic community based on quite different levels of commitment to orthodoxy.

This helps explain the apparent paradox of a religion which is adhered to by an overwhelming proportion of the population, yet which is described as a political outsider, and is regarded, and at times has seemed even to regard itself, as a minority religion. This is so because it is really ‘orthodox’ Islam which occupies this ‘outsider’ position. Islamic orthodoxy is not (or at least was not) accepted by the majority of Indonesian Muslims. Moreover, the santri variant of Islam was for the most part rejected by the traditional ruling elite of Java, who preferred a sophisticated version of abangan beliefs.

But other factors too have played an important part in the development and maintenance of this paradox, not least the policies of Indonesia’s colonial rulers. Although the Dutch resisted any temptations to attempt the full-scale Christian conversion of Indonesia, they preferred to work and rule through traditional rulers who were either non-Islamic or less committed to Islamic orthodoxy. Dutch policy and practice contributed to the creation of Indonesian Islam’s character as an ‘outsider’, and helped to ensure that this character would continue into the post-colonial era. It did so in two main ways. Firstly, Dutch policy heightened the existing animosity between the traditional ruling groups, supported by Dutch power, and Islamic religious leaders who were suspected and constrained by that same power.

Secondly, belated Dutch attempts to produce a western-educated elite to staff the colonial bureaucracy helped to ensure the development of a secular-minded independence movement. Overwhelmingly, the tiny few who received a western education were drawn from the traditional ruling elites and were thus on the whole predisposed against Islamic orthodoxy, an inclination which their western education would have done little to dispel. It was from the ranks of this western-educated elite that most of Indonesia’s nationalist political...
leaders stepped to lead Indonesia to independence.

Although many of the ‘secular nationalists’ were Muslims, some even quite devout, they accepted a ‘church-state’ division, seeing it as indispensable to the creation of a modern nation state. This attitude placed them in a position of fundamental opposition with the ‘Islamic nationalists’ for whom the establishment of an Islamic state was the ultimate objective. The independent state which was established in 1945 was effectively secular, although face was saved for the Islamic nationalists by the inclusion of ‘Belief in God’ as the first principle in the five principled state ideology known as Pancasila.

The post-independence military-political leadership around Soeharto was unsympathetic towards Islamic political ambitions—not without some justification. Islam was now the only intact civilian political force capable of posing any challenge to New Order authority, precisely because Islam remains ultimately beyond the ability of the state to control. But if the New Order regime has been about anything during its 25 years in power, it has been about establishing, in the name of development and stability, an unprecedented degree of social control. Accordingly, Islam bore the brunt of state efforts to construct a top-down political system with severely limited scope both for civilian input into the political process.

Since the Pancasila is held to include all that is legitimately Indonesian, it follows that anything deemed to be outside of its embrace is illegitimate in the Indonesian context, and hence deserving of repression or expulsion. Furthermore, since the Pancasila is wholly inclusive, then in a system of ‘Pancasila democracy’, legitimate political debate can proceed only from the basis of an absolute shared acceptance of the Pancasila. This acceptance also implies a rejection of ‘oppositionist’ behaviour (a concept which includes the practice of western democracy) because Pancasila democracy is based on the principle of a consensus which embraces everybody. Therefore, those who raise the banner of Islam as a political ideology are seen to have automatically placed themselves outside the legitimate political process and beyond the philosophical pale which inspires it.

Furthermore, the government does not regard its policy as aimed at excluding Islam from the political process. On the contrary, it is aimed at the complete incorporation of Islam into the legitimate political process. Since Islam is an integral part of Indonesian society, then it must become a reconciled member of the Indonesian family and take its allotted place in the political process of Pancasila democracy. This, ipso facto, means Islam jettisoning its identity as a separate political entity and with it its traditional penchant (as a political outsider) for providing a pole of attraction for oppositionist tendencies.

By the late 1980s, it appeared that the New Order had succeeded in ‘taming’ Islam politically. Its political representation had shrunk to a shadow of its former self. All Islamic organisations now accepted the primacy of the Pancasila and Islamic energies seemed primarily directed into the ‘safe’ areas of religious and social activities. It is against this background that the recent government behaviour with regard to Islam must be understood.

In terms of gestures, Soeharto has certainly made a dramatic shift. Nor should gestures be underestimated, especially in the Indonesian context where a great deal of politics is played out at the symbolic level. But nothing has substantially altered in the New Order’s attitude towards the political place of Islam. Independent political activity by Islamic forces, particularly that which mobilises Muslims as Muslims, is as frowned upon as ever.

However, it may be that the government has misjudged the situation by giving the mass-based, religious/social Islamic organisations greater freedom to intervene in specific political questions, albeit cautiously and from within the parameters of the sanctioned discourse. The prime example of this is the major Islamic contribution to the general debate over democratisation and political openness. There is now a huge potential for further Islamic involvement in questions which concern growing numbers of Indonesians, such as land rights, wages and labour conditions, and human rights in general. Should Islamic forces become involved on a larger scale in these issues, then certainly the government would be hard pressed to contain the situation without making substantial concessions or resorting to large-scale repression.

Australians’ knowledge about Indonesia, and especially Indonesian Islam, is limited. Irrational fears about populous Asian nations on the one hand, and Islam on the other, are difficult to counter, and episodes such as the closure of the Monitor only tend to encourage them. The Monitor’s crime was to print the results of a reader survey in which readers nominated the person they most admired. In this ranking the prophet Mohammed appeared in eleventh place behind various political figures and popular personalities such as the pop star Iwan Fals. This was regarded as blasphemous since it seemed to be comparing the prophet with ordinary human beings. Some Indonesian Muslims called for the death penalty.

This is one side of Indonesian Islam, but that there is another side is evident from the fact that many devout Muslims vociferously opposed the Monitor closure. Indeed, the Monitor affair was the catalyst which led to the founding of the barely tolerated Democracy Forum, a loose association of prominent and courageous intellectuals, chaired by Abdurrahman Wahid, which aims at the promotion of democracy.

Although it is impossible to predict the future direction that Indonesia will take, significant changes are quite likely before the end of this century and Islam will undoubtedly play a major role in them. It is not impossible that Indonesia will become more democratic and politically open, and Indonesian Islam could certainly be a major contributor to this process. Such a development could only bode well for Australia, since it is the difference between our respective political cultures which is the underlying cause of much of the recurrent friction in the Australia-Indonesia relationship.

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