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# **“Barry” Obama in Indonesia: Islam, democracy and development**

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Jaume Giné Daví

Lecturer at ESADE Law School

## ***ABSTRACT***

- In Indonesia, Obama insisted: “Democracy and Islam are compatible”. But the Radicals are putting pressure on the Government and gaining the support of the Indonesian society at the expense of the Moderates.
- Obama also stressed that democracy and development reinforce each other. Indonesians can vote freely and democratically but corruption continues to be an inherent problem, like a never-ending tsunami.
- Finally, he repeated that “The USA is not and never will be at war with Islam” and called for Muslims to become more involved in the fight against terrorism. The USA cannot beat Al Qaeda and its allies on its own.
- Jakarta wishes to reinforce its strategic military alliance with the USA. It does not wish to be at the mercy of China, either from an economic or military standpoint.

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### ***“Barry” Obama in Indonesia: Islam, democracy and development***

Barack Obama returned to the White House following his second visit to Asia. He had lived there before. Between 1967 and 1971 he spent four years of his childhood living in a Jakarta neighbourhood. He went to the same school as classmates of different faiths. He was nicknamed “Barry”. Forty years later, on 9

November 2010, Barry returned to Indonesia as the President of the USA. The visit, postponed twice in March and June of this year, only lasted 24 hours.

Indonesia, with 240 million inhabitants, is the fourth most populated country in the world, enormously rich in natural resources and located in a strategic geographical enclave in South-East Asia. The main international energy supply shipping routes pass through the Malacca Strait, situated in front of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, linking China, Japan and South Korea to the Middle East.

The Indonesian economy was badly hit by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, which led to the fall of the Suharto regime. However, it has barely been affected by the current global crisis and, after growing 4.5% in 2009, it is set to grow 6% in 2010, motivated above all by domestic consumption. Only China and India have grown more. But Indonesia is the most powerful economy among ASEAN member states and it is a permanent G20 member. Its foreign trade is directed more towards Asia than the West. Its economic ties with China do not stop growing, especially since the establishment of the China –ASEAN Free Trade Area in January 2010. The Indonesians fear, with good reason, that their markets will be bombarded with cheap Chinese products, with no competition. Added to the economic threats are China's rearmament and territorial preferences in the South China Sea. These are factors which promote economic relations with India, South Korea and Taiwan. Direct foreign investment reached \$7.8 billion in the first half of 2010, 40% more than the same period in 2009. It could reach \$13.1 billion in 2010.

Jakarta wants to reinforce its strategic alliance with the USA. It does not want to be at the mercy of China. Nor at the mercy of the USA either. It is playing a balancing act between Washington and Beijing. Obama knows it and stated in Jakarta before the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) that "...China being prosperous and secure is positive. And we're not interested in containing that process"; a message to placate China following Washington's explicit support of India in its wish to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

SBY was hoping to benefit from Obama's visit by obtaining economic results and signing generous bilateral trade, education and even military agreements. Indonesia needs to export more and receive greater US investment to further the development and modernisation of a country in which 70% of the population earn their economic livelihood in the informal sector. Manna from Heaven which does come from China. A few days before, a delegation from China announced new investments to the tune of \$6.6 billion to improve the country's obsolete infrastructures, placing special emphasis on the building of roads, bridges and canals. The Chinese are not interested in making pretty speeches, but in "doing business". And they parade around South East Asia weighed down with a huge sack of hard currency. And now they are also heading for the European Union.

But Obama was more interested in talking about "universal values" than economic or trade issues. After paying a visit to the mosque at Istiqlal, he delivered a major speech before 6,500 people at the University of Indonesia Auditorium in Jakarta. He began with a few words in the Bahasa language, evoking his personal ties with the country by saying "Indonesia is part of me". US-Islamic relations was the main theme of his speech; relations that have worsened in the last decade and whose restoration is a priority for Obama. He repeated, as he did in Cairo in June 2009, that "**Democracy and Islam** are compatible". Indonesia, with 180 million Muslims, is the world's largest Muslim country, but it is not an Islamic State. Six religions have been officially recognised in the country. For Obama this is an example that a democratic, modern Islam is possible. The national motto of Indonesia is "Unity in Diversity" and political and religious pluralism is accepted. Religion, in theory, belongs to the citizen's private sphere. But, in practice, religion inspires and exerts an intense influence on the country's political and social life.

However, Islamic Radicals are also exerting increasing pressure on the Government in Indonesia demanding greater Islamic presence in public life, with increasingly less tolerant, often violent attitudes and actions against other religious faiths, Christians and Hindus being the most affected. In this way, the Islamic Moderates are gradually giving in to the Radicals. These look towards

their Malaysian neighbour, an Islamic State whose legislation does not even permit conversion from Islam to other faiths. The vast majority of Indonesians clearly do not want a radical Islamic regime like the one in Iran, but they no longer hide their sympathy for the social activities carried out by some Islamic organisations. The Internet is the most effective medium for spreading Islam among the young. SYD is not brave enough to tackle them because there are Islamic party members in his coalition government. The army, which has undergone a generational change, remains on the margin of politics for the time being, even though it continues to be an ever-watchful key institution.

Obama insisted, as he did in India, on stressing that Democracy is a universal value and the best system to ensure the economic development of a country. **Democracy and development** mutually reinforce each other, since progress without freedom leads to another form of poverty. He criticised indirectly the emergence of the Chinese model of “capitalism without political pluralism”, exceedingly attractive for developing countries: a model that tolerates or gives support to authoritarian regimes, such as those in Burma (Myanmar) and North Korea, even though the USA has committed the mistake of incoherence by giving military support to Saudi Arabia, a country which finances the expansion of Wahhabi Islam in the region with its petrodollars.

Many Indonesians are sceptical about the impact of democracy on their standard of living and quality of life. They can vote for their political representatives freely and democratically in election processes that permit power rotation. SBY was re-elected with over 60% of the votes in the first round of the presidential elections in August 2009. He has promised to eradicate corruption. But this continues to be a chronic problem in the country, like a never-ending tsunami, which has gradually undermined the confidence of the Indonesians in SBY. According to Transparency International 2009, Indonesia is ranked 126 out of 163 states. According to Doing Business 2010, published by the WB, Indonesia is ranked 121 out of 183 countries. The economy is growing, but regional and social inequalities are too. It was ranked 108 out of 169 states in the UNDP Human Development Index in 2010. The Government

was recommended by the OECD in its report, Economic Survey Indonesia 2010, to increase its investments in infrastructures and secondary education.

Obama reminded the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world that “The USA is not and never will be at war with Islam”. And that present-day conflicts are not caused by religions but by the fanaticism of some religious groups or individuals. Obama asked Muslims to take a more active part in the fight against terrorism because the USA cannot fight Al Qaeda and its allies on its own. He reminded the Indonesians of this in their country also hard hit, like India, by terrorist attacks, such as the ones in Bali in 2002 and 2005. The USA and Indonesia have strengthened their military cooperation. In July military ties between the US military and Kopassus, the Indonesian Army Special Forces group, were restored. They had been severed in 1999 due to acts committed during the military occupation of East Timor.

However, Obama’s messages clash with the harsh reality. Many Americans still mistakenly identify Islam with Al Qaeda fanaticism. Some even believe that Obama professes to be a Muslim. And many Muslims, also Indonesians, identify the USA with Israel and continue to feel disheartened by the lack of significant progress in the Middle East Peace Talks. While Obama appeals for peace, the Israeli Government continues with its policy of building settlements in occupied territories. Nor do the prolonged US military presence and intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan help matters, since they have not brought peace to the area, but quite the contrary. A massive fortune in arms has been squandered, but some of the causes of radicalism in the area, such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, and the lack of opportunities to emerge from under-development, have not been addressed.

Indonesia is a mosaic of islands, peoples, cultures and languages. But it has gradually established a national Indonesian identity, which has arisen from its fight for independence. Accepting Bahasa as the lingua franca of Indonesia has also been a positive factor. But there are multiple tensions between the national identity and the national and cultural identities firmly rooted in the thousands of islands that make up the archipelago; between radical and moderate Islam;

between Muslims (85%) and citizens of other religious faiths, mainly Christians and Hindus; between the centralisation of the island of Java (130 million inhabitants) and the wish for decentralisation of the thousands of other islands; between urban and rural communities; between the privileged classes and almost half of the population who survive on less than two dollars a day; between tradition and the modern world, etc.

This is the country that “Barry” Obama visited. He was only there for 24 hours. He greeted his old classmates. Today he is the president of the world’s most powerful nation. He is losing political support both inside and outside the USA. But “Barry” is still a young idealist and will persist in his reconciliation efforts. He will return next year when the East Asian Summit (EAS), is held in Jakarta within the framework of the ASEAN, whose presidency will be chaired by Indonesia in 2011.

**Jaume Giné Daví**

Lecturer at the ESADE Law School

**For further information about ESADEgeo's Position Papers, please feel free to contact:**

**Irene García García**

Jr. Research Fellow

ESADE Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics

Av. Pedralbes 60-62, 08034 Barcelona, Spain

[irene.garcia2@esade.edu](mailto:irene.garcia2@esade.edu)

93 280.61.62 Ext. 3917