

## EIR Interview

A TALK WITH HON. MAHENDRA SIREGAR

# Indonesia on the threshold of a new, democratic era

*On May 19, the campaign opens for parliamentary elections, in which an estimated 130-140 million Indonesians will vote on June 7. This election is considered the most important in 44 years, since the democratic and multi-party elections in 1955.*

*The elections come in the context of a severe economic crisis. Since the global financial crisis broke out in Asia in 1997, the percentage of the Indonesian population living below the official poverty line has increased dramatically. By 1996, those living in poverty had decreased to 11%, but by the end of 1998 that figure rose to 48%, and it is growing.*

*(See Gail G. Billington, "Indonesia Is 'Dying, Do You Understand?'" EIR, April 16, 1999.)*

*Indonesia has implemented wide-ranging and fundamental reforms, including "revenue-sharing" with the provinces, allowing raw material wealth to remain in the districts. The International Monetary Fund opposed the measures, complaining about "the government's future ability to make debt repayments," but the growing threat of regional crises convinced the government to go ahead. The Law on Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations, passed on April 23, allows provinces to keep 15% of the government's share of oil revenues, 30% of gas revenues, and 80% of forestry, mining and fisheries. It includes an "equalization fund" to ensure that resource-poor provinces receive a like amount of government revenue.*

*In addition, Indonesia has ended the dual function of the military (known as dwifungsi) in military and civil matters,*

*including positions in civil bureaucracies across the country. On April 23, the government passed legislation to eliminate many of these positions, while also providing for the local election (rather than appointment from Jakarta) of district chiefs and mayors. Measures taken last October required most dwifungsi officers in civilian posts to either quit their posts or resign from the military by April 1. This included 4 Cabinet ministers, 10 of 27 provincial governors, and 128 or 306 district chiefs and mayors. About 35% resigned from the military.*

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**EIR:** Indonesia's election campaign starts on May 19. I'd like to review the process that has led up to these elections, what is expected will happen in the course of the elections, and the scope of what is being attempted.

**Siregar:** I thank you for the question, because it is very important to not forget that it was only last year when, in fact, the whole reform movement of the students led to the result of bringing down President Suharto. It was exactly on May 21, that the former President had to step down, and if you look at the last 12 months, we have achieved, I think, by any standard, significant progress in all three sectors of the reforms: political, economic, and legal.

**EIR:** Can you outline briefly what these reforms were and what has been accomplished?

**Siregar:** Yes. For the political reforms, the main, important agenda is to elect new members of Parliament, that is, the upper house, the People's Consultative Assembly, as well as



the lower level, the House of Representatives—that is the election we are going to have on June 7.

Second, as a consequence of that reform, we will have a newly elected President and cabinet at the end of this year. You have to understand that it is because of the agreement between the present government and the present members of the Parliament, forced by the reform movement of the students and many other parties, including the press, that this timetable has been agreed to; otherwise, we would have to wait until 2003 for elections. So, that in itself is a significant reform. But, of course, there are some people who would say that it is not fast enough, and they would like to see everything the day after Suharto stepped down; but it was not possible.

For the economic sector, although the economy was in recession last year, with negative growth of 13.5%, in the first quarter of 1999 we witnessed growth of 1.3% compared to the fourth quarter of 1998. So, once again, it should not be seen as an absolute and separate number; you have to see that in the right perspective, comparing the 13.5% negative growth last year to 1.3% positive growth nowadays. So that, by any standard, is an achievement. We are continuing the economic reforms, including restructuring the corporate sector, restructuring the corporate debts, recapitalizing the bank-

ing sector, and lowering the interest rates, and reforming monetary and fiscal policies as well. What is important in that particular reform, is to make sure that the matter of all problems in this sector, that is, the “kkn”—collusion, corruption, and nepotism—will not return.

As for the legal reform, this is, I think, the sector that remains to undergo much more reform in the future. But, we have started by implementing very strategic political regulations and laws that have set the coming elections, and have introduced laws that allow as many political parties as the people want for the general election, and have abandoned all types of laws and regulations that restrict the media. The number of publications has tripled in the last 7-8 months. Once again, these are significant changes and developments by any standard, but, you know, you won’t be able to satisfy everyone, obviously.

**EIR:** What will be the difference in the composition of the Parliament? Previously, you had a number of seats reserved for the military and, I believe, appointed seats.

**Siregar:** Let me start with the military seats. The number of military representatives in the House of Representatives has been reduced, from 75 in the previous arrangement to only

38 in the coming Parliament. The other 462 members will be elected on June 7, that is, for the lower house, the House of Representatives. As for the upper house, the People's Consultative Assembly [MPR], it will consist of all 500 of the lower house, plus 200 other members, which includes the representatives of provinces and representative groups in the society.

For the representatives of the provinces, there will be 5 representatives for each province, which means a total of 135 for 27 provinces in the MPR. These people will be elected by the members of the local parliaments; while in the past they would be more directly appointed by the central or local government, but now they will be elected locally, representing the provinces.

If I may digress a little bit: This is in line with the commitment of the Parliament and the government to provide more autonomy to the provinces, a better balance between central and provincial-level governments, as well as revenues and expenditures. What is important, is to accommodate the desires of many parts of Indonesia, like Aceh, Irian Jaya, East Timor, Riau, Kalimantan, and many other places, to be listened to and to participate more actively in deciding their own programs, their own schedules, and their own lives, in a way. By name, it is not federalism, but by design, or by format, it is hard not to say it is not federalism.

Let me return to the question about the other 65 members of the MPR, the upper house. They will consist of people representing many groups or professions and interests. The press, for example, will be represented in the Parliament, farmers, fishermen, and also doctors, students, youth, etc. The representation of functional groups is in our 1945 Constitution.

**EIR:** In giving greater authority to the provinces, what are the powers that will rest exclusively with the central government?

**Siregar:** Foreign policy, defense, and fiscal policy are the main policies that will remain with the central government. But even there, it depends on the conditions and circumstances of each province, so that being decentralized should not mean that the most underdeveloped and the most unfortunate provinces are left to take care of their own problems. That in itself is not fair, and we should help these people and these provinces by giving more effort to help them undertake their own initiative and the capability to solve their problems.

Indonesia is so diverse that it would be impossible to have a magic formula for all 27 provinces, and I think, in a way, that was one of our mistakes in the past.

**EIR:** In the past, there were only three recognized political parties in Indonesia. This time around, something extraordinary happened with these elections. Can you review the sheer number of people who would be eligible to vote in these elections?

**Siregar:** Out of 205-207 million population, the eligible voters would be around 65-70%, so we're talking around 130-

140 million. Even with the present situation, where the registration period is very, very short, we have successfully registered around 75% of eligible voters. The registration period started in the third week of April and, originally, it was to close last weekend, but because of the technical problems in many parts of Indonesia, it was extended until the end of this week. So, with this situation, we have reached 75% of registration, and even in East Timor, for example, the number has reached 50% or more of the total eligible voters. And, we are quite optimistic that the people who have registered will participate in the elections.

**EIR:** And when does the campaign period start?

**Siregar:** It will start on May 19, for two weeks, until early June.

**EIR:** Is there a period of time, just before the elections, when no campaigning is allowed?

**Siregar:** In the past, we would have what we call a quiet, or "silence" week, that is, a full week of no campaigning before the election. But now, because time is short, the quiet week, or silence, will only be for two days.

**EIR:** How many parties attempted to register, and how many will actually contest in the elections?

**Siregar:** Originally, there were 144 parties registered, because it was a very simple procedure—they simply had to go to the Ministry of Justice and register the name. But, out of that 144, the committee scrutinizing party requirements accepted 60 parties as having fulfilled the administrative procedures for political parties. Out of those 60 parties, only 48 parties are now considered as final participants for the coming elections, because the other 12 did not pass the representative test in the provinces. But, I understand the somewhat cynical reaction by Americans, or by others, about the number of parties being so high. People will say, how can a government or country be run effectively with that many parties?

I think, once again, it is important to understand the perspective and the context. The context is, the Indonesian people during the last 30 years did not have the chance to give their votes and aspirations democratically, and based on that, all of the other objectives, including an effective government, would be perceived as less important than the right and the chance and opportunity for all Indonesians to say something about their lives.

We should understand that, and we should, on the contrary, applaud these 48 parties, because with the current economic situation, with the problem of negative growth in the economy, still we can have 48 parties willing to take part, for the first time in 44 years or more, in a democratic election. I think what we should do is welcome this, and applaud these people's brave actions, not the other way around.

**EIR:** My understanding is that they have to have actual physical offices and campaign apparatus at the local level to meet

the requirement. What were the parameters for a party to be approved?

**Siregar:** Yes, every party has to be represented in at least one-third of the provinces, or 9 out of 27 provinces. Within the 9 provinces, they have to be represented in 50% of the districts. Of course, after we have these 48 parties, they have to nominate their candidates in those provinces and districts where they are represented. This is still in process.

**EIR:** What is the youth factor in these elections, either as first-time voters or as part of how the vote will be conducted?

**Siregar:** Once again, we should not forget that it is the young people who make things like this possible, because it was the students who made possible what we have today in Indonesia, with this election. Because of that, we can see that some of the parties are led by very young people and students, whose idealism is quite high. And, in addition to that, there will be around 600,000 university students taking part as observers to monitor the elections.

In a way, there is no alternative for universities other than to customize their examination and new semester schedules with the general elections, and that decision has been reached between the committee overseeing the general election and the universities. So, these 600,000 students will hopefully be effective as soon as the schedule for observers and monitors is established.

**EIR:** Would these monitors be active throughout the whole campaign period, up to and including election day itself?

**Siregar:** Absolutely, including the post-election, in counting the votes, until the final outcome is announced.

**EIR:** In the campaign period itself, what would be the kind of things that these students would monitor? Has there been some trouble with fights between parties?

**Siregar:** Technically speaking, I don't think I can answer that question, because as far as I understand, the formal regulations of the campaign itself have not yet been finalized. My own personal assessment is that the most important thing that the students could do is to, in a way, not only prevent or cure, but more important, is to educate the followers of the political parties in the way that they should understand that it would be better not only for the party or the elections, but for the country as a whole if we can conduct this general election peacefully. And, I think the students are doing a very good job in that.

Another example: We should recognize their contribution in the last two talk shows between Presidential candidates, which were conducted and organized by the students. So, through that, their own civic and political education is much improved, in terms of how we should conduct this campaign peacefully, even before the campaign officially opens.

**EIR:** The June elections are for Parliament, and the President will be elected in a special election in November?

**Siregar:** That is the timetable agreed to by the present government and the present members of Parliament, so, tentatively, that will be the timetable. But, whatever the newly elected members of Parliament decide could change that.

**EIR:** Already, you have people who have put themselves forward as candidates. What is the process by which, and when, do the parties nominate Presidential candidates?

**Siregar:** Officially, they should not start that before the general election takes place in June, because you don't know the outcome of that election—which are the major parties that will win or, through forming a coalition, could nominate Presidential candidates. But, we are not talking about procedure here. It is important, I understand that. But what is also important to recognize, is that we are doing a civic education program in a very short time. So, any type of initiative which might not be perceived as officially accepted, but as long as it is conducted in a peaceful manner and is based on the good will to educate people and the political parties—don't forget, most of these political parties are new, they might not even have any clue what to do. So, if things are conducted for this purpose, I think the people will accept that happily.

**EIR:** Can you give an idea of who has emerged as either self-professed Presidential candidates, or likely candidates?

**Siregar:** As far as I know, there are no surprises. The people who have been quoted or named unofficially by some parties, or by the students, are those who have been named for quite some time, such as Amien Rais, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid (“Gus Dur”), and, of course, President B.J. Habibie himself. So, there are no new people among this small group, but I should also name General Wiranto and the Sultan of Yogyakarta.

**EIR:** I noticed also that the election commission ruled that ministers who intend to campaign for their parties have to resign their posts in government. I think two ministers did that in the last week. This is new.

**Siregar:** You're right. The chairman of the Golkar Party, who is the Minister for State Secretariat, Akbar Tanjung, has resigned from his post, and the other one is the Minister for Investment, Hamzah Haz, who is the chairman of one of the Muslim parties, the United Development Party.

**EIR:** Is there a role for foreign pollwatchers or observers in the election?

**Siregar:** Yes, it has been agreed among the Indonesian government, the general election committee, and the UN Development Program [UNDP] to have foreign observers and monitors coordinated by the UNDP and the general election committee. As far as I understand, there are already tens, if not hundreds of them, now in Indonesia from various countries around the world, including the United States—or, mostly the United States—and we would welcome their participation. Because, in a way, that would produce a greater credibility of

the general election—although, we have to remind people that, officially speaking, this is the general election conducted by Indonesians for Indonesians, and the participation of the UNDP and foreign observers is just to complement the process. It is not a UN election.

**EIR:** At a briefing at the embassy earlier this year on the elections, it was said that foreign non-governmental organizations cannot spend money on election training or setting up NGOs in Indonesia to accept money for election purposes.

**Siregar:** It's not Indonesia-based NGOs that are the issue, but the political parties. Indonesian political parties should not accept any foreign donations regardless of sources.

**EIR:** Cambodia, for example, has one of the highest ratios of NGOs per capita in the world, and the NGOs played a very big role in attempting to shape the elections, in terms of training in elections, democracy, and human rights. At the briefing here, I had asked about the role of the International Republican Institute, and what its relationship to the elections would be.

**Siregar:** We are very well aware about that, and, I think, the evidence suggests now, that it is the political parties which are actively coordinating and organizing the civic education through the general election committee. They are more in charge than the NGOs or the government, and I think that is the correct way to go, because the general election, as it should be, is the business of political parties. These are their concerns, not of others.

Those who would like to help, including U.S. NGOs, for example, should channel that through a more acceptable arrangement, such as the UNDP, which can then coordinate with the general election committee. But, we should not have direct relations between political parties and foreign NGOs. That would only lead to unnecessary politicization of issues, which would be detrimental to the general election itself, and would be counterproductive.

**EIR:** What are the issues in the elections? What struck me in the course of the last year is the extent to which the students did not seem to take up economics, and there was very little anti-International Monetary Fund [IMF] protest, for example.

**Siregar:** I think everyone agrees that the most difficult problem that the present government faces is about legitimacy. I think that whatever the outcome, whoever wins, we should no longer have this legitimacy question, because in that situation, whatever you do, whatever you think, is very much put in doubt by the people in the country and internationally.

I think that that is the main issue to be solved in this coming election, whoever the winner. And from the political parties' point of view, I understand that the issues that have been undertaken officially, at least by the government, are the issues that have created great interest from the parties. Issues like decentralization, regional autonomy, human rights, better

and more equal income distribution across regions and social layers, equal opportunity for education, health facilities, public services, and utilities.

We are not talking about extraordinary issues as such, because I think the issues are still the same. The issues are not the big question now; it is the will and the trust of people of the various parties participating in the elections. The general election is not issue-based, maybe, but trust-based.

**EIR:** There has been from the outside, from the international community, the IMF, and so on, discussion of the need for reform. But, in fact, at this point, my sense is that there is no turning back, no calling off these elections; the psychological momentum in the country is such that this difficult, but necessary challenge must go ahead.

**Siregar:** Yes, absolutely, I think that when you have a very difficult economic situation on the one hand, and you have so many regions or provinces asking for more autonomy and even more, in some cases, separatism, I think the only way to move ahead is to form a democratic, new Indonesia. I don't believe there is any other way to have that democratic, new Indonesia other than through general elections. I think the logic is very simple.

**EIR:** Earlier this year, Dr. Nurcholish Madjid had made the point that not everything will be solved with this election, but it sets in motion a process where, when problems arise, they can be addressed, and subsequently lead to the needed legal and other reforms, but that this, given what the country has gone through in the last year, is an essential first step in that direction to restore confidence in the population.

**Siregar:** I very much agree with that, but we also have to recognize that there are other reforms and forces, which are conducive to the improvement of the situation, which are now taking place—as I said, the economic reform, the legal reform. They are all there, but to speed up these other processes would require a democratic and peaceful general election. It doesn't mean that this general election will solve all the problems, but we are doing a lot of other things as well, like with the case of East Timor, which, coincidentally, will also be solved around this period of time. All forces are not based on the general election itself, but certainly the outcome of a peaceful, successful, and democratic general election will speed up the solutions to all these other problems.

**EIR:** Let's look at some of the problems in the regions. In the East Timor case, will they, for example, be participating in the June 7 elections for Parliament?

**Siregar:** Yes, because until June 7, their status is still part of Indonesia, as it is constituted in our law, so they will take part in the general election.

**EIR:** And then, the special vote that will take place on Aug. 8?

**Siregar:** Yes, that is the UN-organized popular consultation for the people to choose whether they would accept the concept of autonomy within the unitary state of Indonesia or, if not, then they will have to decide themselves to take a separate way.

**EIR:** What happens after that point?

**Siregar:** The outcome of the Aug. 8 popular consultation will be presented and discussed by the newly elected members of the upper house of the Parliament, the MPR, hopefully, at the end of August, when it meets for the first session of that body, for 7-10 days. Hopefully, whatever the outcome, it will be approved by the members of Parliament, and that will become law.

**EIR:** What are the implications? If the vote goes for extended autonomy, then, in fact, there will be more power-sharing with East Timor, along the lines of other provinces? If not, if there is a vote to break with integration, what happens?

**Siregar:** It depends on the members of the coming Parliament, but they should recognize that Indonesia has signed the agreement with Portugal under the auspices of the UN Secretary General, and I am confident, although we are talking very much ahead of things, and we have to wait and see, but whoever wins the general election next month, should uphold the international agreement that has been signed.

Ironically, there is something of an anomaly in this case. Megawati Sukarnoputri, chairman of the PDI-Struggle party, an opposition party leader, widely seen, especially in the West, as a democratic leader, has stated clearly and repeatedly that, were she President, she could not accept independence for East Timor. Yet, Indonesia has signed the accord with the UN. I don't want to speculate and make any hypothetical analysis about this matter. The country will deal with that when and if it is required later.

**EIR:** From the United States, reading about Indonesia, the picture that you get is of non-stop crisis and yet, in fact, the process that you just described could not be taking place if constant turmoil were happening. Reading the *Washington Post* and a recent report by Human Rights Watch, for example, there is a very clear bias to paint the problems in East Timor as a one-sided conflict, with both the *Post* and Human Rights Watch weighing in for the pro-independence faction.

Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said after the signing of the UN-backed agreement on May 6: "There are two sides in the East Timor conflict, let's face it. . . . And they are fighting with one another as they have done for the past 23 years. So, if you want to disarm them, disarm both."

I've wanted to ask for a very long time: If you compare the 300 years of Portugal's occupation of East Timor and the 24 years that Indonesia exercised control, what did Portugal ever do to improve the living standards of East Timor?

**Siregar:** I think it would be better to ask the East Timorese

that question, because they would say that it is not only that the Portuguese did not provide anything to them during their 400, not 300, years of occupation, but even in the last minutes of their presence there, they just totally abandoned the area. It was not only that earlier 400 years, but even the last minute of their presence, they just packed up and left without any transition whatsoever for the people of East Timor to become an independent state at that time.

Regarding the situation in the last 24 years, being an integrated part of Indonesia, I think East Timor now is much more open, maybe not in the recent several months or so, but before, so many journalists and foreign dignitaries came to East Timor, they witnessed the physical progress of development in East Timor.

The problem with a situation like this, anywhere in the world, if you do not solve the political status of East Timor, once and for all, whatever development, whatever program you build and organize, it will be easily hijacked by the unrealistic dream. In any part of the world, there are always winners and losers in political elections, but if you are in the final status, and independence or expanded autonomy is no longer an issue, you have to deal with that. However difficult the situation, if you are the loser in that political procedure, if you cling to the belief that by proclaiming independence you don't have to follow the outcome of the general election, and you can dream of creating your own government, then people are not focussed on the right things in developing their own life, but rather they are much more focussed on this unrealistic image. And that in itself is detrimental to the process of improving the situation in East Timor, and that is what's been going on in the last 24 years.

Regardless of the political interests of Indonesia, I think that what is important now and in the future, is to provide the opportunity to the people of East Timor to decide once and for all their own destiny, and if they can solve that issue, whatever the outcome, I believe it will bring a more realistic focus on their immediate problems and concerns, rather than keeping on dreaming unrealistically.

**EIR:** One issue that has come up around the ongoing crisis in the Balkans: Does it improve political stability, or the physical welfare of the population, to create a multitude of micro states that may not be economically viable?

**Siregar:** I would tend to agree with you on that matter, but, once again, in relation to the East Timor situation, it is a different story. Unfortunately, the political status of the province is still very much a pending matter on the UN agenda, so, as a country that abides by the UN regulations, we have to honor that. I don't want to be accused of any kind of "hidden agenda" of Indonesia. Our only agenda is to follow the agreement of the UN-organized self-determination agreement on East Timor, and we will respect that.

But, if you ask about other parts of Indonesia, that is a different case, such as things happening in Aceh, in Irian Jaya,

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in Riau. We have to understand that these are not in any way self-determination issues, and they were *never* self-determination issues, because these are parts of Indonesia, acknowledged not only by the country, but also by the international community. So, that is their final status; there is no question about it.

In the past, during Suharto's government, it was very much a human rights issue—yes, absolutely. Human rights issues in a way that these people in general were not provided equal opportunity to have access to development and the benefits of development. We acknowledge that very much. That is why we are trying our best to speed up the process of the decentralization, but still, this decentralization needs laws, needs regulations, and needs concepts, and it takes time. Once again, we should not forget that it is only 12 months that we have had this new government, so it takes time.

In addition to that, we also have several problem spots around the country, such as in Maluku. But, in Maluku, I don't think the issue is about human rights. It is about the dispute between groups of people, which have different ethnic or religious backgrounds. My understanding of human rights violations or problems means that if the government or the authorities, which includes police or the army, took abusive actions against the people, that is a violation of human rights. But, if it is a fight between people or groups of people, it is not an issue of human rights here, it is a different issue. It could be lack of equal opportunity between these groups, or it could be rooted in historical problems between these groups—but it is not a human rights issue.

I think that to generalize all of the problems as human rights problems or issues in Indonesia, is useless. In some cases they are, but in most cases they are not. So, if you take that as human rights problems across the board, then I don't think that would bring any benefit to solving the problems on the ground.

**EIR:** Also, given what has happened in the economy in the last 18 months, human rights is also economic rights, and if people are struggling to survive and to make ends meet, then that creates political tension of its own, which can only fuel residual conflicts between different groups. But in Maluku, earlier this year, Dr. Nurcholish Madjid gave a briefing in Washington where he described the capital of Maluku, Am-

bon, as the “sweet city,” because of the historical harmony of relations among the different groups. To what would you attribute the violence there in the last months?

**Siregar:** Well, there are many theories that have arisen from this very unfortunate situation in Ambon, Maluku. Some of them, or many of them, believe that it is a result of acts by provocateurs. I don't want to speculate about that, because this is still very much at the level of theories. I believe that, regardless whether the problem is provoked by other people who have their hidden agenda or intentions in creating problems around Indonesia, we have to recognize the difficulty and the challenges that people have to face in living together in harmony with different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

In a way, the 30 years of Suharto provided a very secure situation in the way that the armed forces of Indonesia, Abri, always took control of everything. Every type of democratic action or freedom of speech, or whatever, was totally limited and restricted, so that a difference of ideas has never been heard in many places in Indonesia. It depends on how you classify that situation: On the one hand, it is a safe and secure situation, but, on the other hand, there is no democratic life there.

Now, with the reform, people can act, can express views, freedoms, and unfortunately, some of their actions are not accepted by other groups of people. These are the extremes of what has been happening over the earlier 30 years, when we had no freedom at all and now, maybe, in a way, too much freedom, with no social responsibility. You just say whatever you want to say, and that includes things that hurt other people's feelings or religion or ethnic identity, and that creates problems in countries as diversified as Indonesia.

**EIR:** General Wiranto has taken a pro-active stance in trying to address concerns about human rights and other alleged abuses in the past year, including a number of investigations, and President Habibie made a first-ever trip to Aceh. So, there is an ongoing effort, in parallel with the reforms of the political process, to address acknowledged problems from the past. In Maluku, for example, a team of officers originally from Maluku, of different backgrounds, was deployed to address problems.

**Siregar:** I understand the concern, but, once again, you have to understand the reality on the ground. The ratio of police to

civilians in Indonesia is 1:1,200. By comparison, the U.S. has 1:250; Hong Kong has an even lower ratio of 1:200. Even India, which is much larger in population than Indonesia, has 1:800, an even better ratio than us.

That is one factor; the other factor, which is a consequence of our geographical situation, is that India is all on the same continent. In our situation, we consist of 17,000 islands, so let's talk about the reality. Mobilizing police from one place to another, or people, in general, is a challenge in itself. There is no way that the police force in Indonesia could maintain the security and the safety of the whole country.

They are overstretched, and with the present economic crisis, the number of areas where there are some problems is increasing around the country. They are very much overstretched, and in the last year, they are, in a way, exhausted, because it keeps on, day by day, week by week, in all different places.

**EIR:** And they are not a separate entity; they are themselves Indonesians caught up in this situation.

**Siregar:** That's right. That is why I think we have to understand why the military has to take part in some difficult spots, and even that does not provide a minimum level of security forces. So, that is why the military and the police, especially the police, have to form civilian forces to support them in maintaining security. We are talking about a very realistic problem, and an immediate solution to that.

I can easily argue, well, we will increase the number of police so that we do not need any civilian people to be part of this, but that is unrealistic. Even in the U.S., with the much better ratio, you still need the National Guard; you also have neighborhood watch groups. It is very important to understand why in a country like Indonesia, everything done by the police is taken as being suspicious, that it is just to create conflict between civilians and different groups.

Please understand the subjective conditions of the country and the problems, then you would understand the logic of providing this solution. It is not a permanent solution.

**EIR:** Let me ask about Aceh, because I was struck again last week, as in the East Timor case, by how it is covered in the U.S. press. There was an incident last week where, in the initial reports, it seems there was a crowd of 2-7,000 people, including women and children, who attempted to storm a munitions dump, where even missiles were held, and, unfortunately, the police or troops were outnumbered and they opened fire, and about 40 people were killed. This side to the story, in what has been a long-standing, difficult situation, disappeared from the reporting, in favor of making it appear to be yet another case of unchecked military brutality in Indonesia.

**Siregar:** I don't know what is the real motivation behind U.S. media coverage, which is very much one-sided, not only

on Aceh, but also on East Timor and other issues. It is very unfortunate, and I don't think it benefits the American public to read such one-sided stories, because not only do they not get enough information about the situation, but in some cases, this one-sided information is the only source for some people in making decisions.

The only thing we can do about it is to provide more opportunities, instead of less, to American journalists to visit places and to talk to the people, to better understand the situation. But at the end of the day, it is up to them to decide what type of reporting they would like to see.

For instance, you mentioned Aceh. I would like to draw your attention to a recent incident in East Timor. I just read a quotation from *The Age* in Australia, that during the fight between the pro-integration armed group and the separatist paramilitary, there was a group of journalists trapped in the market. I don't know if you are aware or have read somewhere in the U.S. press that it was the police who saved this group of journalists—rescuing them from the middle of a fight and taking them to the police station and guarding them while the gunfight was still going on outside. It was the police.

**EIR:** What I did read was that the journalist leading the group was advised not to proceed into an area where there clearly was some trouble brewing.

**Siregar:** Yes, exactly, that was earlier. But then, we are talking about journalism, and they might have different ideas and might not trust the police in that situation. But, they took a taxi and went directly to the market where the trouble occurred, and they were threatened by gunshots. Three police officers rescued them, and put them in the police station to keep them safe.

**EIR:** And *The Age* tends not to be that friendly toward Indonesia.

**Siregar:** Usually, that would be the case, but even they covered this fact. But, I have seen nothing in the U.S. press. My personal assessment: I think the safety of any journalist should be of interest for the media, don't you think?

**EIR:** Given the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, with the death of the three journalists, I should think yes. Let me ask about the conflicts between different ethnic groups: You have used the example of your own family to describe how ethnicity alone does not account for why there would be these kinds of conflicts.

**Siregar:** It's a long process of living together among different ethnic and religious groups, which is required by Indonesians to stay united. But, on the other hand, the way in which we have conducted the civic and political education in the last 30 years—in the way that all the students, from very early on up to the university level, are educated to ignore the social and political challenges happening in Indonesia.



On the one hand, this is the real problem of having such diversity in Indonesia, but, on the other hand, we did not have the opportunity to understand and to learn of these problems, because it was in part the political strategy of the previous government to remain in power, to make people less attracted to examining social, political situations, in a way to make people ignore and close their eyes to these situations.

With the advent of reform, now people can once again open their eyes to all the injustice and unfair treatment that their groups have received in the last decades, and they make noise and make demands for attention where they have been ignored. But, unfortunately, since not too many of us are aware of the sensitivity of the different ethnic groups and religions in Indonesia, these people tend not to understand how they should express their protest and concerns without violating other people's rights.

I think that this is the situation, unfortunately, because if you go further down into a family situation, it is not a problem. A husband and wife may have different background in terms of ethnicity, and even religion. There are so many matrices of possibilities; maybe one joins the spouse's religion, or maybe they keep their separate religions, and they decide what their children's religion will be. But this system works because they participate actively in deciding what is best, what is not good for them. One way or the other, they can solve the problems without any force or break-up, because they are actively participating.

But, on the much larger scale, unfortunately, that is not the case. They were not participating, and even, by design, their ability to understand the situation was neglected. So, once they have the possibility to voice their protests and concern, then unfortunate situations happen.

**EIR:** Among the early reforms was ending certain classifications by ethnic or religious identity?

**Siregar:** I think you are referring to a special code or mark used to distinguish people who were allegedly taking part in the communist party organization. This policy has been abolished. But, in Indonesia, unlike in the U.S., all forms will have a question about your religion, not ethnicity. It is a standard form, and there's nothing wrong with that.

**EIR:** Under the Constitution, everyone has to choose one of five religions?

**Siregar:** It's the state ideology, the *Pancasila*, which says that everyone should have a stated religion, a belief in God. There's nothing wrong with that, no human rights violation.

**EIR:** Declaring that people should have a belief in God might be useful. I question whether that's true here.

**Siregar:** For instance, let me tell you a little about East Timor. When the Portuguese left East Timor, I understand that there were less than 100 or so churches, and only 40-50% of the population were Catholics. But now there are close to 800

churches, and 90% or more are Catholic believers. Even the Vatican gave Indonesia very high recognition of this achievement. So, there are things that are not very well understood, or are overshadowed by some political, or the more popular human rights issues.

Talk of human rights: The practice of religion is one of the basic rights, and there is no problem with this in Indonesia as a whole. But, you should not confuse that with the burning of mosques and churches. This is, once again, the problems that the people and the community have to face in safeguarding not only their own religious places, but also their friends' and families' religious places. And, it has been that way for a long time.

**EIR:** And the state ideology makes that very clear, the equal recognition of the different faiths.

**Siregar:** I still remember in many parts of Indonesia, during the Friday prayers for the Muslims, it was the Christians who kept watch on the cars and parking spaces, and that sort of thing. And during Sunday services, the Muslims watched out for the logistics for the Christians. That actually was the situation in Ambon, but not any more. This is a path, I believe, that every country has to go through, and now, unfortunately, is our time to go through this, to have a better country.

**EIR:** Indonesia is not going through this situation in a vacuum, but it is happening in a world situation, which has become more dangerous of late, certainly, given the implications of the Balkans crisis and the latest incident, with the unfortunate bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. In particular, it has put into question the role of the United Nations in international conflicts and conflict resolution. Indonesia was very much involved in the first Balkans war in the early 1990s, and Indonesian troops participated in the UN peacekeeping force. How is this situation being seen from Indonesia now?

**Siregar:** We are always consistent in our foreign policy position; regardless of our domestic situation, we always have a consistent foreign policy. That is, regarding the Yugoslavia situation nowadays, we regret the actions taken by NATO in bombing Yugoslavia, because we understand it is not the decision by the United Nations, and only the United Nations could deploy or take actions such as what NATO is doing now. We, in a way, do not agree and even condemn the bombing as a whole by NATO on Yugoslavia, because that is against international law.

Because of that, we are also consistent with the incident of the Chinese Embassy being bombed. We condemn and regret the situation, because that would only make things more complicated. We regret the bombing and these unfortunate consequences. It is important for all countries to restrain themselves from taking unilateral or group actions without the consent of the United Nations.

**EIR:** *EIR's* founder, Lyndon LaRouche, has situated this attack on the Chinese Embassy in the context of what has been developing over the last months as a new collaborative relationship among a group of nations—China, India, Russia—around economic development, in friendship with the United States. President Clinton has talked about a Marshall Plan for the Balkans, but he has also talked about his priorities being to establish good relations with Russia and China, and our fear is that this incident will disrupt those relations. How does Indonesia see these new relations among major powers?

**Siregar:** I think we should understand that even the IMF recognizes the limitations it has in solving not only the regional problems, but now, the global economic problems. So, I think that any initiative from any country should be perceived as showing their commitment and goodwill in solving the global crisis. We should not politicize the attempt to find solutions in these economic and global crises by claiming that unless this is the initiative of this or that country, it should not be considered. I think that is ridiculous.

If we accept the concept of globalization, we should accept the concept of global solutions, and thus we should accept the participation of the global community. It is not the monopoly of one organization or one country. I think that is the position of Indonesia, and we would support any attempt and any help conducted by any country in solving the economic

problems, and we believe the international community should do that as well.

**EIR:** Before this crisis, the Southeast Asian countries were collaborating on a number of major infrastructure projects in the region, including a series of bridges that would have connected Malaysia to Sumatra to Java and then to Bali. Most recently, I saw a report about a railroad that would circumscribe Kalimantan and connect with ferry service to the Philippines archipelago. This is the kind of thinking, big thinking, that Indonesia is known for in terms of nation-building. How do you see Indonesia's role, given what's going on in the country now?

**Siregar:** Once again, with the present position of the Indonesian government, it would be difficult to do that, but as far as I understand, being an Indonesian, hopefully the general election will produce a much stronger leader, who will provide not only Indonesia, but the region and globally, concepts that will contribute to the solution of the global problems. Because in the past, if you understand Indonesian foreign policy, and even domestic history, you would see that any Indonesian leader does not consider his own country as the limit or the playground of action; we also play an important and ethical role globally, and we will do that again, hopefully, very soon.

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EIR's Jeffrey Steinberg (left) and Gail Billington interview Cambodian Ambassador Var Houth.

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