

Cultural exchange a way to build mutual trust

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The Indonesian-Australian relationship today is at its peak. I am happy to tell you that between Australia and Indonesia there is a relationship of trust. Both sides have earned that trust and both are striving to deserve it.

Australian-Indonesian relations start with a disadvantage: nations with long common borders can often be uneasy with each other, and our two countries are no exception. That disadvantage, of course, can be overcome - but it will take some work.

Consider the differences between our histories, cultures and traditions, and world views. And consider the gap in the stages of our economic development. An Oriental society with collectivist traditions that is also a developing economy will have a different set of priorities than that of an economically developed society of European extraction that is growing more and more cosmopolitan.

Such differences, compounded by ignorance of each other, and abetted by the antics of populist politicians and a few sensationalist members of mass media on both sides, can lead to an unhealthy relationship. They can drive us to create unsavoury mental caricatures of each other.

Hence, there is such a thing as Australophobia in Indonesia. This stems from the perception that Australians are so enamoured with their imagined superiority that they meddle in the internal affairs of their neighbours.

On the other hand, there is in Australia a widespread perception of Indonesia as a militaristic society, with aggressive designs on its neighbours, including Australia. And there is a perception of Indonesia as a society that breeds Muslim terrorists, including suicide bombers.

Nothing can be more ridiculous than these mental images - but they often drive people to do unreasonable things. They are stereotypes that have no flesh-and-blood existence but they exist - and persist - in the minds of people. It is largely because of these stereotypes that there has been, from time to time, periods of volatility in the bilateral relations between Australia and Indonesia and, quite often, a deterioration of the quality of public opinion in both countries.

What has saved us from the tyranny of stereotypes is a stronger realisation of our commonalities and shared interests. We have simply realised that we need each other.

Australia is an important trading and investment partner of Indonesia - although in this regard, I hasten to add that there is plenty of room for growth. Indonesia is a reliable and strong supporter of Australia's engagement with the rest of East Asia. We have a common interest in ensuring the stability and equitable prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region.

The gift of trust did not come to us like manna from heaven: we both must earn it. Indonesia purchased much of that trust with the hard coin of reform. Through reform, we salvaged our economy from the devastation of the Asian crisis of 1997 to 1998, and became the world's third-most populous democracy, after India and the United States.

The terrorists who carried out the carnage on Bali in October 2002 might have thought that by killing Australians on Indonesian territory they could drive a wedge between our two countries. They were mistaken. The tragedy drew Australia and Indonesia closer together.

In spite of the stereotypes, there is plenty of goodwill in Indonesia today for Australians. Let us build on that. I want to see more Australians travel, play, rest, study, research, and make new friends in Indonesia. Those who are interested in Asian studies can make Indonesia their gateway to deeper knowledge. To the artists among you, come to Bali and find out how the artists of Europe found the fullest expression of their soul on that island paradise. To the entrepreneurs, come and avail yourselves of our latest package of investment incentives. And I fervently wish that this will be a two-way flow.

I would like more and more Indonesians to study in Australia - by scores of thousands every year if possible. I should like more and more Indonesian businessmen to look into opportunities in a strongly growing Australian economy.

Let us expand and intensify our people-to-people contacts in all fields, especially in trade and investment, and in culture and education. Let this effort be our way of dispelling the mental caricatures that are retarding our co-operation. Let it be the main pillar of our bilateral relations.

Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is the President of Indonesia. This is an edited extract of his keynote address at the Asialink Centre on Sunday.

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