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## Gus Dur's Mid-Eastern odyssey

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PRESIDENT Abdurrahman Wahid has embarked on a visit to a number of Middle East countries including the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. This trip to the volatile region would be his third during the one and a half years of his administration: he has previously visited Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt and Iran. But what would be the significance of Abdurrahman's trip to the region?

For Indonesia, the Middle East is a special place. Egypt, for instance, was the first country to recognise Indonesia's sovereignty after its proclamation of independence in 1945. Historically, Egypt-Indonesia religious-cultural ties already existed in the 20th century - there was a common bond of Islam and educational activities.

Islamic revivalism in Indonesia, such as the Muhammadiyah, was for long influenced by the same movement led by Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in Egypt.

During the Sukarno era, Indonesia enjoyed strong ties with the Middle East, and with Egypt in particular. The significant role that Sukarno and Egyptian President Gammal Abdul Nasser played during the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung - which gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 - testified to this good relationship.

Under Suharto, however, no significant progress was recorded in Indonesia's relations with the Middle East countries - in all probability because Jakarta tended to disregard the region while keeping its sight focused on the West.

This is despite the fact that its neighbours in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations such as Singapore and Malaysia, and other Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan have very good ties with the Middle East.

Malaysia is a good case in point. When the Lebanon war ended in 1995, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited Beirut along with a large entourage of Malaysian business people.

Dr Mahathir offered Beirut whatever assistance he could for the reconstruction of post-war Lebanon, thus exemplifying the kind of proactive stance a government could take toward a war-ravaged friend.

When the Iran-Iraq War ended, it was business people from Korea, Singapore and Malaysia who ventured into the region. Indonesia always lagged behind, ignoring the great market potential there.

Another evidence of Indonesia's neglect of the Middle East can be found in the minimal role that Jakarta has been playing in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) - which is dominated by the Middle East countries.

Despite his long rule of 32 years, Soeharto only once attended the OIC summit despite its strategic role in the strengthening of ties with the Middle East. It thus became obvious to the Middle East countries how Indonesia regarded them.

One explanation of this stance is: Suharto was responding to the domestic situation and his fears of "political Islam". He might have assumed that building ties with the Middle East, which is predominately Muslim, would be tantamount to letting "political Islam" grow strong.

It was probably for this reason that Indonesia became the last country to open a Palestinian embassy, after Malaysia and other Muslim countries.

One thing to note, however, is that Egypt was the last country that

Suharto visited before his fall from grace in 1998.

When Abdurrahman, or Gus Dur, came to power and appointed Alwi Shihab - a native of Makassar, South Sulawesi, of Arabic descent - as foreign minister, there was hope that this would bring better ties with the Middle East.

This expectation was boosted because Abdurrahman himself declared his intention to "re-orient" foreign policy.

Instead, he made a blunder and announced his intention to open ties with Israel, the great enemy of Arab countries.

There were at least three possible reasons for Gus Dur's intention, the first being his and Alwi's wish to be seen as committed to pluralism and inter-faith tolerance.

Secondly, their hope that an opening of trade ties with Israel could be a "short-cut" to the restoration of the Indonesian economy. Thirdly, by opening ties with Israel, Jakarta wished to help find solutions to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In the context of Indonesia-Middle East relations however, any plans to open ties with Israel could instead bring the following consequences:

- \* Indonesia would be seen as inconsistent in its support of the Palestinians;

- \* Indonesia might be accused of violating its own Constitution, which explicitly rejects all forms of occupation;

- \* A weakening of the economic and political relations between Indonesia and the Middle East;

- \* Indonesia might be accused of further undermining the economic and political position of Palestine. Israel, for example, has continued in its campaign to sever trade relations between Palestine and the European Union;

- \* No less damaging is the flare-up of controversies within Indonesia, which could be counter-productive to the campaign to restore social, political and economic conditions.

Fortunately, Gus Dur called off his plan for Indonesia-Israel relations, thus restoring the hope for better ties with the Middle East.

At least one positive sign was seen when in May 2000, economic ministers of some Arab countries such as Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen held a meeting with the then Indonesian economic minister Kwik Kian Gie to study investments here.

As reported, the government wanted to invite Arab investment by offering three types of projects; privatisation of state-owned companies, ventures in companies that were being "dealt with" by the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency, and ventures in the private sector.

The initial target of the expected US\$500 million (RM1.9 billion) investment fund was the purchase of state-owned companies and IBRA-controlled assets.

Among the sectors on offer included mining, banking, manufacturing, agriculture, infrastructure, telecommunications, tourism and transportation. There were plans, for instance, for Saudi Arabian investment in Bank Central Asia.

The proposed investment fund began with a Kuwait loan in the Consultative Group on Indonesia (CGI) package that has yet to be disbursed. Jakarta suggested that the loan be turned into investment and Kuwait agreed, as did Qatar and Abu Dhabi.

Politically, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's visit to Jakarta in August 2000 boosted the Indonesian image in the Middle East. Although it would still be difficult for Jakarta to play a role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, given that it has yet to settle various conflicts at home, the Government should not stop its efforts to improve both political and

economic ties with the Middle East.

Aside from his blunder, Gus Dur has actually stepped in the right direction. Together with Morocco and Algiers, Indonesia passed a resolution that condemned Israel during the Inter-Parliamentary Union in October 2000 in Jakarta.

The resolution helped clean up Gus Dur's image after it was tarnished by reports of his closeness with some of Israel's political elite and his wish to open trade ties with the Jewish state.

The President's speech during the OIC summit in Doha, Qatar in November 2000 also helped, as it attested to Indonesia's commitment to the interests of the Palestinians.

In conclusion, Gus Dur's administration has help to bring about relatively improved ties between Indonesia and the Middle East. The remaining question is: How will Jakarta continue from this point onward?

Today, when ties with the West, especially the United States and Australia, are of questionable benefit, the Middle East could certainly be a good alternative.

It would do Abdurrahman good to emulate Dr Mahathir's stance on the Middle East. Hopefully he will start doing so during his trip.

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