

THROWING A FIT

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is throwing tantrums at Australia over West Papuan asylum seekers. Where is this heading to?

By *Bishen Bedi*

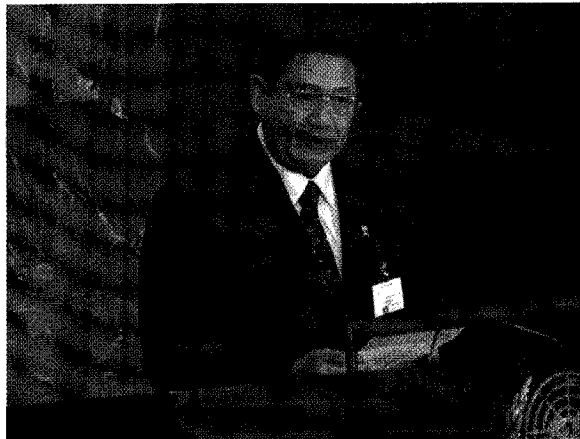
INDONESIA just can't seem to take a trick. Or win one. Still smarting from being booted out of East Timor in 1999, after its brutal occupation of the former Portuguese colony after forcefully annexing it in 1975, it was nervous about Aceh, the north Sumatran oil-rich province, going the same way, with the armed Free Aceh Movement (FAM)'s secession plans. That problem has been solved, for now. And if hardcore Indonesian nationalists are looking for any consolation, it is that East Timor is increasingly mired in growing social and sectarian violence, thanks to President Xanana Gusmao's government's self-mutilation.

Still, Indonesian nationalists' smirks may be premature. West Papua, which Indonesia has ruled since 1969, and under murky circumstances, is facing deepening political problems. Like the Acehnese and East Timorese, West Papuans want freedom from the regime in Jakarta.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's security forces have been committing crimes in West Papua. As in East Timor and Aceh previously, the Indonesian police and army have been conducting organised state terror. It is state-sponsored terrorism rivalling the corrupt junta's in Myanmar. Yangon has been wilfully brutalising and incarcerating pro-independence supporters of the jailed Aung San Suu Syi. Meanwhile, the junta's military criminals are torturing the ethnic Karen hill-tribe minority, whose Karen National Union has been fighting for autonomy for the last 60 years.

Yudhoyono has tried to swing a heavy

bat at Australia's head when Canberra issued temporary protection (refugee) visas to 40 West Papuan boatpeople who sought asylum in Australia. Canberra, in line with its international obligations, did the right thing, morally and pragmatically. These West Papuans are scared for their lives at the hands of Indonesian security forces if they are returned to West Papua. And Canberra has enough intelligence reports



Yudhoyono: Does he have the depth to solve Indonesia's problems?

confirming Indonesian atrocities in West Papua but it didn't want to publicly raise the matter with Jakarta.

When push came to shove and Yudhoyono told Prime Minister John Howard not to 'mess' with him, Howard's knees buckled. Howard has threatened to repatriate the 40 West Papuans while warning other would-be boatpeople to not even try coming to Australia. They would be turned back, he warned. But this is so like Howard. Those old stripes haven't changed one iota.

More, Australia is seeking membership to Asean. So it doesn't want to rock the

boat. Canberra needs Yudhoyono's support as much as Singapore's to join that club. But why does Canberra need Yudhoyono? Clearly, Yudhoyono is just another lame president. He's no better than Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid or B J Habibie. But the growing economic markets in Southeast Asia are an irresistible lure for the 20 million manically hungry Australian consumers who seem bent on deepening their personal debt woes.

Yudhoyono thought he could do that ridiculous Asian thing: pick up the phone, tell Howard a thing or two, and Howard will cave in and surrender the 40 West Papuans forthwith. Howard's knees may have weakened a little but he hasn't completely buckled to Yudhoyono's demands – yet. Howard told Yudhoyono of Australia's processes for assessing refugee claims, given its obligations to international law and human rights (but while in the same breath conveniently forgetting Iraq, Afghanistan and

David Hicks, an Australian who flounders in the US's Guantanamo Bay prison camp for suspected Islamic terrorists).

Yudhoyono, though, is unimpressed. Sullenly, he decrees that Australian universities, chiefly Deakin, whose academic staff overtly or tacitly support the cause of freedom by West Papuans, will no longer receive Indonesian Government-sponsored students. The decree apparently came from the Indonesian Education Ministry, but it has the stamp of Indonesia's powerful military, Tentara Negara Indonesia (TNI), especially its notorious intelligence arm.

That's just the problem. Yudhoyono thinks he runs the far-flung archipelago. He doesn't. TNI does. And it is sore with Yudhoyono that he had signed a peace deal with FAM before the TNI could wipe out FAM. It's sore still that Jakarta had surrendered East Timor. Now it's worried that it could lose West Papua too. But why should the TNI be worried?

Because to regain its powerful political influence, which has slipped since Suharto's downfall, TNI has tried to find ways to succour its old self back to life. Former President Suharto's Golkar, though which TNI's interests were articulated and advanced in return for protecting the Suharto regime, is today a shade of its former self. So the way back is to align itself with powerful economic interests while boosting its own existing ones by becoming more directly involved in business activities. It's a leaf out of China's People's Army. Former strongman Deng Xiaoping had either turned a blind eye or was too weak to halt the People's Army's march to greater political and economic power on its own and national terms.

And what of Yudhoyono attacking Australia? Utter nonsense. With his popularity and position weakening, like George W Bush's, Yudhoyono sought a convenient scapegoat. Australia under Howard handed itself over to Yudhoyono on a silver platter as Indonesia's whipping boy. Canberra rationalises that some things are worth sacrificing for the sake of securing longer-term national interests.

Yudhoyono was playing up to a domestic audience. Even Indonesia's so-called reformists didn't fault him over his or TNI's brutal stand on West Papua. As Damien Kingsbury, a renowned scholar of Indonesia at Deakin University in Melbourne, and one of whom the Indonesian government has targeted and banned from entry, wrote recently: 'Attacks against Australia generally and individuals and institutions in particular are thus collateral damage in an internal Indonesian battle.'

What the hardliners want is a firm stand by the state against any moves for independence or self-determination. They

want these to be treated as treasonable and put down by whatever means, and quickly. That's because they know that any defection from a unitary Indonesian nation-state would sow the seeds of a domino effect leading to national disintegration.

Looking around the archipelago – from Aceh and West Kalimantan to the Molluccas and West Papua, plus the loose status of ethnic Chinese Indonesians – Suharto's departure hasn't brought freedom to the archipelago any more than it has democracy and stability. It has brought only more instability, more state-sponsored violence, and still growing endemic poverty.

As long as these elements exist across the far-flung archipelago of 17,670 islands in a crescent stretching over 3,500 miles close to Australia on one side and Southeast Asia on the other, Indonesia's problems are far from over. The big question is whether Yudhoyono has the depth and backbone to solve them. It won't happen overnight. Even Yudhoyono knows that. Neither will they be solved in his lifetime. **mb**