
Active Engagement: U.S.-Indonesia Relations

PAUL WOLFOWITZ

Deputy Secretary of Defense, United States of America

An Interview by Jaideep Singh
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Paul Wolfowitz is Deputy Secretary of Defense. Prior to his appointment, he served as Dean and Professor of International Relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of The Johns Hopkins University, where he helped shift the school's focus from the Cold War to the era of globalization.

During the Reagan administration, Wolfowitz served for three years as U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia. From 1989 to 1993, he served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and was in charge of the defense policy team that was responsible for matters concerning strategy, plans, and policy. In 1993, Wolfowitz was the George F. Kennan Professor of National Security Strategy at the National War College, and he has taught previously at Yale University.

Indonesia is a critical country in Southeast Asia, yet it has not always held a prominent public position in U.S. foreign policy. In recent months, however, increased attention has shifted to Indonesia, its stability, and its role in the U.S. "war on terror." In the four years since President Suharto stepped down from power, democratic institutions have been tested and ethnic and religious animosities inflamed. Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population, and extremist groups may threaten a traditionally moderate and accepting Indonesian Islam. It is clear Indonesia represents vital U.S. interests. Wolfowitz's tenure as ambassador to Indonesia and his extensive knowledge of the country will certainly prove invaluable to the Bush administration's foreign policy team.

Journal: Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim country, and much of its population lives in poverty. It is of great strategic significance to the United States, yet also quite vulnerable to unrest. What can the United States do to better support democratization and civil society in Indonesia?

Wolfowitz: In my view Indonesia is important not just because it has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world...Did you call it the largest Muslim country in the world? Well, it's the *country* with the largest Muslim population in the world. I say it that way because a lot of Indonesians are sensitive to calling it a Muslim country. Its real importance is that it's a country that is 90 percent Muslim but that has enormous respect for other religions and makes a point of not having established state religions, even though Islam is obviously the religion of the overwhelming majority of the country.

What makes it so important is not just its size, but that it represents a Muslim tradition that epitomizes tolerance, respect for women, and a very open attitude to the world. That is in marked contrast to what the extremists who carried out the World Trade Center attacks are trying to present as Muslim.

I think it is very important for the United States to encourage Indonesia's success. That's made even more important by the collapse of the dictatorship four years ago and transition to democracy that is now under way, under probably the most difficult conditions as any country can face. I think we have a very big stake in their success, obviously not as big as theirs, but a big one. It's important for us to help them in whatever ways we can.

Journal: Dr. Federspiel, an author in this issue, recalls luncheon sessions with academics and intellectuals you held at your home in your days as Ambassador in Jakarta. He said you were quite skilled at fostering good relations with the Muslim community and opening new channels of communication. Should we do more to engage Indonesian Islam, as it has traditionally been very moderate and accepting?

Wolfowitz: You've given me the opportunity to say something about our current Ambassador Skip Boyce which is quite wonderful. He has been out and about and making contacts with Muslim groups of every variety and I think it is making a strong positive impression. As a matter of fact, I had occasion today to meet with the head of the Muhammadiyah movement, one of the two largest Islamic movements in Indonesia. I recalled with some pleasure the time I addressed Muhammadiyah University in Jakarta, and he told me I was the first foreign ambassador to address them. And then I learned that Ambassador Boyce has addressed them three times in the short time he's been there.

I think something that is a great characteristic of Indonesians is that they really appreciate openness and willingness to listen and discuss—more so than some places where people don't want you to just discuss with them, but to agree with them. And if you don't agree with them, you might as well stay home. In Indonesia you get enormous points just for coming and presenting your view and listening to other people's views.

Journal: Turning to the war on terrorism, how has cooperation improved since the days following the terrorist attacks last September?

Wolfowitz: It's largely on the law enforcement front and our FBI director Robert Mueller was out there a few weeks ago for a regional conference and had some very positive things to say about the cooperation the FBI is getting from the Indonesians. I know of at least one case that I'm only allowed to refer to euphemistically, in which a very dangerous foreign individual who was using Indonesia as an operating location was arrested and deported at our request to his own country. I think that's an example of the kind of cooperation we welcome. I think it's a sensitive subject in Indonesia because I think there is still a certain misunderstanding that if we say that there may be some bad actors in the country a lot of people take it as somehow an accusation against the whole country. We know there are bad actors in the United States, there are bad actors in Germany, and there are bad actors all over the world. Of course there are some in Indonesia as well.

The real point that can't be stressed often enough is that our view of Indonesia is a place where the most positive values are to be found. That's something we want to be sensitive to as we encourage the work on the law enforcement problem.

Journal: Laskar Jihad is a very sensitive topic in Indonesia right now because of its role in Ambon. Would the administration consider Laskar Jihad a terrorist organization?

Wolfowitz: Ambon? Yes. And also I think in Sulawesi. I mean, I think the simple answer to "is it a terrorist organization?" is no. Is it an organization that has engaged in some disruptive activity? I think the answer to that is yes. I know there are some Indonesians who very much don't like that sort of activity, who nevertheless feel they [Laskar Jihad] act more out of ignorance and more out of reaction to the difficult economic and social conditions in the country than out of a deep-seated sort of malice. I guess that's another way of saying that I know Indonesians whose opinions I respect a lot who think these people could be educated and persuaded to a different course of action. That's the reason why

it's very difficult for people operating from the distance we are to step into the middle of a country and make those kinds of judgments. What I would say is that I think it's very clear that the communal violence in Ambon and Sulawesi is a very harmful thing and that its harm extends beyond Indonesia because it is the kind of thing that can contribute to chaos in the short run and it's the kind of thing extremists can exploit. So we are quite clear that we would like to work with both the Indonesian governments and NGOs who have good ideas on how to tamp down that violence.

Journal: Would that be referring to a kind of internal security force, like a peacekeeping force?

Wolfowitz: Well, that's a possibility. I think since the Malino declarations, the Indonesians have been doing more—and doing it quite intelligently—with their military to establish more secure conditions in Sulawesi. It isn't just the military. Indeed, it's encouraging to hear from Syafii Maarif today that the two largest Muslim organizations in the country, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) were combining efforts with Christian groups to bring aid and assistance to those communities and to try and oppose violence.

Journal: What kind of restrictions would the Pentagon like Congress to lift on restoring ties with TNI, and what would you like to see out of the security dialogue to be held in late April [2002]?

Wolfowitz: Let me make clear first that there's no fundamental difference in view between us and Congress on the need for military reform. And they're working at the moment within the latitude that the legislation allows us to develop interaction with TNI that we may make maximum use of the latitude that's provided by the legislation. It's not a secret that we're thinking about ideas and ways of possibly moving forward more quickly, but I'd emphasize two things: First of all, we have to move forward more quickly, not just on interacting with their military, but also there's got to be real movement on military reform because the military isn't going to be able to do the job it needs to do unless it develops a very different relationship with the civil population. And secondly, we're not going to do anything without close consultation with Congress. So far there's been a lot of talk and a fair amount of thinking, but I would say we're still in the exploratory phases and I suspect that that meeting in Jakarta will generate more ideas from both sides as to ways we might move forward.

Journal: How significant is it that the military raises approximately 75 percent of its own budget? Is that something you think is a major problem?

Wolfowitz: You could almost put it the other way around. A major problem is that they only get 25 percent of their funding from the budget. I remember being told years ago that Megawati, when she was still vice president, in small cabinet meetings observed that the problem in Maluku is when they sent military forces to try to keep the peace and try to prevent violence between Christians and Muslims, the army would arrive there with only a fraction of what they needed to live on and the result was that they ended up living off a village—which was either a Christian village or a Muslim village—and they very quickly ceased to be peacekeepers and became the defenders of that particular village. I thought it was a rather succinct way of describing some of the problems you run into with an underfunded military. Having said that, this is a very big problem and one that Indonesia, in its difficult economic circumstances, does not have any simple solution. I do think it's the kind of problem that if we could get back to a closer relationship with the Indonesian military we might be able to help them at least think of ways to address it. You're right that it's a big problem. As I implied in my answer, you can view it from either end, and it's not one that has a simple or quick solution.

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Journal: Sharia law has been imposed in Aceh. Will that have a great effect around the country if radical Islamist groups see that as something they can aspire to?

Wolfowitz: Aceh has always had a very unique identity. Indonesia is made of many parts that are different in many ways from one another, but Aceh really much more so. And that's why in fact it is a "special area," of which the only other one is Yogyakarta, which was the old royal capital. I think all Indonesians understand that what may be appropriate in Aceh isn't necessarily appropriate anywhere else. What you mention, though, is actually a larger problem. As the country decentralizes—which I think it has to do—there is a tendency for each individual area to want whatever is the best deal that some other province got with the central government. The government has to manage all of that while holding the country together, which I think is a huge challenge. Like I said earlier, it's hard to imagine more difficult circumstances for a democratic transition. This is one of those circumstances.

Journal: Catharin Dalpino of the Brookings Institution writes in this issue of the *Journal* that Jakarta may need to tighten controls in areas of horizontal conflict, such as Sulawesi, Ambon, and Kalimantan, and yet loosen its military grip on Aceh and West Papua. Would you agree with such a formulation?

Wolfowitz: Well, I think it's a perceptive comment. I think it also illustrates a fundamental dilemma, which I think is something that people who care about human rights need to think about also. That is that there are situations such as Sulawesi and Maluku where you need the capability to provide security if you're going to protect minority communities and prevent ethnic violence. I remember being so struck when I went to Indonesia as an election observer three years ago by the Chinese communities in Jakarta, which had been devastated the year before by those horrible riots; the only institution they had any confidence in was the army. With all of its faults, maybe the army is the thing that might protect ethnic minorities from abuse. I'm not saying that the army is wonderful, but it illustrates the importance of security for human rights.

On the other hand, I think there has to be some considerable devolution of authority from the central government to the provinces and that you can't successfully run a country as diverse as Indonesia in a democratic fashion without that kind of decentralization. Doing the two at the same time is a big challenge.

Journal: Indonesian Islam, as we have talked about before, is traditionally more moderate and very accepting. Are you concerned about a move toward radicalism among the populace and, if so, does the United States have to do more to win the "hearts and minds" in Indonesia?

Wolfowitz: Well, I have a lot of confidence in mainstream Islam in Indonesia, and if there's winning of hearts and minds to be done, it's the mainstream Muslim movement that needs to do it. Whether we can help is something that I think we always need to ask. It's a question I asked Syafii Maarif today and he said the best thing the United States can do is provide educational opportunities for young Indonesians. I would also add that, in general, the more we can do to help the economy recover, that will always implicitly strengthen the hands of moderate, reasonable people against extremists. There's no question that extremism thrives on misery, and Indonesia's been through a lot in the past few years. For all of Suharto's faults—which were considerable—he did help to demonstrate that Indonesia is capable of real economic growth. I think if they can get back on that path and we can help them do it, I think it's probably the most important thing we can do. ●