

# Outside View: A match made in heaven

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**JAKARTA, Sept. 14 (UPI)** -- If you say the words "presidential visit" and "Indonesia" together in political circles in any Western nation today, the conversation will quickly turn to the two visits to Indonesia that U.S. President Barack Obama postponed earlier this year.

While Indonesians reacted stoically to the news that their adopted son wouldn't be coming home anytime soon, the words "presidential visit" actually bring to mind a different trip for locals, one that was little-reported in the West: the July visit of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Turkey to meet with his counterpart, President Abdullah Gul, the first such visit in 25 years.

There, the two nations forged a new "strategic partnership", signing eight separate agreements that promise to deepen their relationship -- including an initiative to abolish visa requirements between the two nations and increase bilateral trade from \$1.78 billion today to \$10 billion.

It was, as journalist Mahir Zeynalov puts it, "a visit that has carried relations between the two countries far beyond where they were previously."

But for Western observers who have spent the past year asking, "Who lost Turkey?" the new partnership brings a new question: Is the fact that the two most powerful Muslim-majority secular democracies on Earth are moving more in lock-step cause for celebration -- or concern? And as Ankara seemingly becomes less secular, should reports of "creeping Islamism" across Indonesia be considered with greater urgency?

Ever since Turkey handed power in 2002 to Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- who famously declared that "the mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers" -- Turkey has looked east. From its advocacy that women wear head scarves to its refusal to allow the United States to enter Iraq through its territory to its "Free Gaza" flotilla to its vote against the United States in the U.N. Security Council on Iraq sanctions, it has seemed like Ataturk's 90-year secular experiment may be near an end. This past Sunday's constitutional referendum in Turkey -- in which Turks voted to strengthen government's power over the courts and army -- only deepens those fears.

"Turkey is at a crossroads which Indonesia had in the 1950s," Anies Baswedan, president of Jakarta's Paramadina University, tells me. "In 1955, Indonesia's leaders campaigned on making Indonesia an Islamic state. It created deadlock and Parliament was disbanded. From the '70s to the '90s, there was no electoral process. Now, Indonesia is a democracy. Those who thought we should be sterile from religion lost and those who wanted extreme nationalism lost and we ended up in the middle."

"But," he adds warily. "This could be just for the next few elections. Alumni from the Masyumi youth wing that wanted to

make Indonesia an Islamic state in the 1950s and '60s are now in charge of Indonesian politics. Will religion enter into politics? We'll have to see."

Some believe it already has. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Islamic vigilantism has been on the rise in Indonesia. More than 400 churches in Indonesia have been burned, bombed, or forcibly closed by Islamic militants in recent years. Attacks on Christian groups have tripled this year, with 28 incidents through July. The week I arrived, in early August, a mob of 800 Muslim extremists attacked dozens of members of a Protestant church 15 miles west of Jakarta.

The most prominent of the vigilante groups, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), has burned churches, attacked a minority Muslim sect, assaulted peaceful activists from non-governmental organizations and violently and publicly advocated for an Islamic state governed by Shariah law. Disturbingly, rather than distancing themselves, public figures have courted the group. Jakarta Gov. Fauzi Bowo and Police Chief Timur Pradopo attended FPI's 12th anniversary celebration last month and Yudhoyono has all but ignored the attacks.

"It's a complicated picture here and you can reach two conclusions," a high-ranking diplomat tells me. "One, there are pockets of conservatism and radical groups but Indonesia is more engaged and less Shariah. Two, it looks true on the surface but below the surface, like in state schools, according to the curriculum, you have to recite the Koran and the trend is ratcheting up all the time. Islam is becoming less tolerant. I don't know where the truth lies between the two. But there's a government failure to stop attacks on churches."

Adds Sidney Jones, a senior director at the International Crisis Group: "The long-term problem isn't radical Islam but non-violent radicalism from groups who say that Islam is the answer and are anti-globalization and say that the capitalists are the real terrorists. They have systematic infiltration into local governments and influence public policy."

Since 2003, about half of the provinces and districts in Indonesia have steadily begun to apply Shariah-inspired bylaws under pressure from hard-line groups. And yet, as Parliament Member Kemal Stanboel points out, Indonesia is far from the seventh century: "We have 55 million people accessing the Internet, 20 million on Facebook and 165 million using cell phones. People try and say that Turkey is a model for Islam but Indonesia has its own model."

A volcano on the Indonesian island of Sumatra erupted for the first time since the 16th century, about the time that hard-core Islam first took root in Indonesia and Turkish-Indonesian relations began. Time will tell if this new eruption in relations between Turkey and Indonesia is a match made in heaven.