



# Indonesia's powderkeg

A battle is raging in Australia's neighbour between pluralism and fundamentalism, write **Julia Suryakusuma** and **Tim Lindsey**.

**I**NDONESIA is in the middle of an explosive debate about whether conservative Islamic morality will become enforceable law in that nation of 230 million. It is a debate that threatens to unravel the secular foundation of the republic itself.

Amid street protests, the DPR, Indonesia's newly democratic legislature, is debating a reactionary Anti-Pornography Bill that is really an attempt to introduce hardline interpretations of sharia (Islamic law) by stealth. The bill would criminalise much sexuality, force women to cover up almost completely, largely exclude them from public space and tightly censor the arts and media. If passed, it would give Islam a new, dominant position in law and politics that generations of Indonesian leaders have tried to avoid. And it would inevitably create huge difficulties for the relationship with Australia.

How did Indonesia get to this frightening position? A wave of local elections through to late 2005 seeking to implement democratisation and decentralisation delivered dramatic political change in Indonesia, cementing a broader social process under way since 1998, when the dictatorial Soeharto lost power. Of a hundred local elections conducted to date, some 40 per cent or so resulted in the rise of new elites.

Many of these are male traditional leaders pushed to one side under Soeharto's "New Order", who draw their authority from traditional local sources and look for legitimacy for conservative and socially regressive values linked to local identity. In many regions these groups have replaced Jakarta-endorsed bureaucrats, who, for all their many failings, often had a strongly secular nationalist bent and some commitment to a modernising agenda. The old-for-new elites are influencing local policy across the country.

The local heroes want to differentiate themselves from the apparatchiks of the past and to strengthen their local support by adopting agendas sponsored by conservative social groups, often religious in nature. The result has been a wave of attempts to introduce conservative interpretations of sharia-

derived moral norms through local regulations and bylaws. This has occurred most obviously in autonomous Aceh. It is even more disruptive, however, in other areas that have greater religious and social plurality.

That some of these new regulations are inspired by Muslim hardliners is clear. The Acehese laws, for example, drew inspiration from radical and controversial sharia codes

introduced in Malaysian states Kelantan and Trengganu by the conservative Islamic party PAS. Likewise, a local congress that led to the drafting of a proposed law for South Sulawesi in Indonesia in 2001 was attended by Abu Bakar Bashir, leader of terrorist organisation Jemaah Islamiah.

In 2002, hardliners were soundly defeated in the national legislature in attempts to insert a clause obliging Muslims to follow sharia into the constitution, from which it had been deleted in 1945. This was a proposal for which radicals, including Bashir, had campaigned hard. National failure led them to renew efforts at the local level, with some success. Now they are back at the national level: the Anti-Pornography Bill is the local sharia regulations writ large.

Like them, the bill would ban modern behaviour that offends traditional and religious cultural norms. If passed in its original form it would prohibit forms of expression that its supporters consider *pornoaksi* (pornographic actions) — mainly sexuality or women's self-expression. Public displays of affection (such as holding hands) would be criminalised and so would expos-

ing "sensitive" body parts such as breasts, thighs, belly and navel, as well as, even, hair, shoulders and legs. Women have already been arrested for these sorts of offences under the hardline regional laws in some areas, including the outskirts of Jakarta itself.

The Anti-Pornography Bill is about denying women and sexuality public space. It uses pornography as an excuse, equating expression of sexuality outside the marriage bed — even the very presence of women outside the home — with obscenity and criminality. And it would lock up artists and



writers who present these themes, as do many artists in most societies, including Indonesia, which has a vibrant, flourishing and cosmopolitan artistic and cultural scene.

The irony is that these reforms, intended to give democracy and the right to a voice to millions of Indonesians silenced for decades under Soeharto, may now strip away from half of them some of the few rights they enjoyed under his rule. While decentralisation may deliver political democracy to the regions, it may also deny social democracy — at least for women and non-Muslims.

The real fate of these laws will most likely be decided in the streets, as demos and protests for and against it continue unabated, often led by women. Even if the bill fails,

however, it is unlikely that the issue will fade away, because what the legislature is considering is in reality a proxy for a broader and persistent debate: should Indonesian Muslims be forced to follow sharia law — and, if so, whose version?

Disagreement was intense among Indonesia's founding fathers in 1945 and there is no sign that anything has changed after 50 years of debate — except that now women are squarely in the argument, too, as both voices and victims.

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