



An EAA Interview with Ambassador Alphonse F. La Porta

Ambassador La Porta retired from the US Foreign Service in the fall of 2003 after thirty-eight years of service in the Department of State, and an overall US Government career of forty-four years. During his time in the Foreign Service, he served as Ambassador to Mongolia and Political Advisor to the Commander of NATO Forces in Southern Europe, Naples, Italy. He also served overseas in Indonesia, Malaysia,

New Zealand, and Turkey. He is a graduate of the National War College. Ambassador La Porta became President of the United States-Indonesia Society (USINDO) in April 2004. We offer our sincere thanks to both Ambassador La Porta and to EAA editorial board member and interviewer, Michele Ferrier Heryford, who is Assistant Director of the Asian Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh.

Michele: *Ambassador La Porta, Indonesia has the world's largest number of Muslims. What is your perception of how American and other Western media depict Islamic practice and various Muslim organizations in Indonesia within the context of efforts by the US and the West to stop radical Islamist terrorists? Are American and Western media generally accurate on this subject? Do you think there are problems with media treatment of this topic?*

Ambassador La Porta: I believe that we in the United States and the West look at Islam outside the Muslim "heartland"—basically from Egypt to Afghanistan—with a low base of understanding and a tendency to see all observant Muslims as the same, or, in the case of zealots here, as threats. Such characterizations are patently incorrect, and the issue of the role of Islam, and religion more generally, cries out for greater discernment and differentiation. The fact that sixty percent of the world's Muslims are outside the greater Middle East testifies to this, hence the importance of looking at Islam in Indonesia/Southeast Asia, India, Turkey, Morocco and other "rim" countries as important in our increasingly globalized and integrated world society. "Stopping terrorists," in and of itself, is futile unless governments or individuals understand the nature of the societies they are dealing with, the lively (as in Indonesia and Turkey) domestic debates over the role of religion in society, and the complex sources of extremism and violence. To be sure, there are two main trends: the "Arabization" of Islamic practice in many locales that clashes with local tradition, and the export of radical Islamist theology, mainly Wahhabism, Salafism, and the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood, that are manifested in acts of terrorism, not only against the West, but also against what is perceived as "secular Islam." We see these strains coming together in Indonesia where the various complexities are now beginning to be written about, discussed openly in a democratic way, and understood. The media overlay on this dynamic tends to report and reflect the negatives in this complex mosaic. However, it is also true that the "globalization of Islam" has depended greatly on the expansion of Middle Eastern media outlets, as well as the power of the Internet, so Muslims outside the heartland are receiving news, well-reported or biased, directly rather than through the filters of CNN, BBC, and other Western media outlets. This is a long answer, I know, but these are deep issues to penetrate.

Michele: *Indonesia is the fourth most populated country in the world. There was a period in the early 1990s when the country appeared to be on an economic upswing, as was the rest of Asia. Then the Asian economic crisis of 1997–98 occurred, and Indonesia, like most other Asian nations, went into an economic tailspin. What are the prospects for economic growth in Indonesia, and do you feel that the country will re-emerge to pre-crisis levels of economic prosperity any time soon?*

Ambassador La Porta: Prospects seem to be increasingly good for restoring pre-Asian financial crisis growth, although it is true that Indonesia suffered to the greatest extent from this turbulence and has taken longer to bounce back. Current economic growth for the first quarter of 2007 was six percent, and is expected to rise to approximately 6.3 percent for the year. Unemployment is down slightly from 11.1 percent in February 2006 to 10.6 percent in 2007; exports—mainly agriculture and energy—are increasing; the Jakarta Stock Exchange is at a high of 2,300 (as of 2007), compared to 1,805 last December; debt is being repaid; and budget and monetary management are stable. Despite concern about the in-flow of portfolio investment and some short-term capital, the macroeconomic fundamentals seem right, but the challenge is to promote investment in productive industries and infrastructure. Recent changes in the Investment Law, a clarification of areas in which investment is sought or is less welcome, and facilitation of physical infrastructure investment, should help to not only modernize the economy, but also to improve Indonesia's regional competitiveness. Rebuilding Indonesia's educational infrastructure and human capital, from primary education through to the universities, is essential to national competitiveness.

Michele: *Indonesia is a very young democracy with just under ten years of democratic rule. In 2004, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected, representing the first direct presidential elections in the history of the country, overriding the previous indirect elections by the legislature. In your opinion, has democracy in Indonesia finally been consolidated? What are the prospects for a fully integrated democracy going forward, and what do you feel are the potential threats to the democratic process in Indonesia?*

Ambassador La Porta: Indonesian leaders tell us that they want their country to be accepted as a democracy after three transitional administrations (Habibie, Gus Dur, and Megawati) and that the institutions of government and commitment to democracy are strong. I believe this is valid up to a point as most domestic or foreign observers no longer fear a breakup of Indonesia into rival ethnic units or the restoration of a military-led autocracy. However, it is also clear that there must be improvements in governance at all levels under a decentralized system, continued defense reform—including the privatization of military-run businesses, strengthening civil society safeguards and organizations, and a consolidation of the political party system. Indonesia has scored great—but little noticed—gains in the last eighteen months as local elections, culminating in the Jakarta elections this past July, have been held in a peaceful and orderly fashion throughout the country. The significance of these local elections—involving the first direct election of governors and district leaders—cannot be underrated and will change and strengthen the practice of Indonesian democracy for many years to come.

Michele: *Indonesia has a diverse and complicated history with China, and Chinese merchants have lived in Indonesia for centuries. What are your thoughts on current Sino-Indonesian relations and your projections of possible future trends regarding the two nations' relationship?*

Ambassador La Porta: The public visibility and role of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese population are far different today under a democratic system than they were even a decade ago. President Habibie, who briefly succeeded Suharto, was responsible for pushing through the first reforms to eliminate official discrimination against the Chinese and other minorities. Today, all indicators of race have been removed from identity cards and official documents. Chinese language schools, newspapers, TV shows, and signboards are very much in evidence. (It is remarkable, for example, to see huge Kentucky Fried Chicken billboards written in Chinese characters!) Confucianism has been recognized as an official religion under the state ideology of *Pancasila*, and young Chinese Indonesians tell me they feel psychologically more secure than their parents' generation. Of importance is the fact that almost all Chinese now are citizens due to generational change, the economy is much more integrated, and young businesspeople with Western degrees are practicing their professions without reliance on the heavy favoritism and "cukong"* system of the Suharto era.

[* Ed: Cukong is a system of "cronyism," or patronage, that refers to illegal trade that favored Chinese conglomerates. This system was common during the Suharto administration.]

On your second point, Indonesians still regard China's motives in the region warily, but this is more reflective of regional trade, energy, and investment patterns, rather than the domestic societal position of ethnic Chinese Indonesians.

Michele: *It is difficult to do an interview about Indonesia without bringing up the tragic circumstances of the tsunami of 2004. At first glance, it seems that there was a great deal of international outpouring of aid and support for the victims in Aceh and for the rest of the country itself. Do you feel that there have been any lessons learned about the response to the tsunami and about its impact on Indonesian society as a whole?*

Ambassador La Porta: The international response to the earthquake and tsunami disaster that struck northern Sumatra on December 26, 2004, was indeed remarkable, if not unprecedented. Media outlets

riveted the world's attention on the immense scale of the human and physical devastation experienced there. The influx of domestic and international aid served the important function of opening what pretty much had been a closed society for nearly two decades because of the increased tempo of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) insurgency. One impact beyond the basic relief effort is that the media now can freely report on political developments and the insurrection, so that the dissidents and the government security forces could no longer hide their repressive actions. There was also a national integration factor as many domestic NGOs, religious organizations, and private charities responded to the situation. Many people have observed that the Acehese feelings of separateness and isolation have diminished. Indeed, this has been the consequence of the August 2005 peace agreement with the GAM, and the ensuing local government law that enabled the election of ex-GAM officials to the provincial administration a few months ago.

Michele: *Finally, our readership represents educators from post-secondary institutions, high school and middle school educators, and scholars at various research organizations. What do you feel our readers might learn that would contribute to their understanding of Indonesia from the US-Indonesia Society Web site or by becoming members of USINDO?*

Ambassador La Porta: I think the US educational community should understand the tremendous task of modernizing education, literally from cradle to grave, that exists in Indonesia. For many reasons—the closed nature of the Suharto system in later years, the Asian financial crisis, the political turbulence of fashioning a new democracy, and three transitional administrations—the quality of education in Indonesia has suffered at a time when there is unprecedented demand. Per capita expenditures on primary and secondary education are the lowest in Asia, exceeding only Burma/Myanmar and Laos, and a tremendous effort is needed to improve teaching methods, encourage cooperative learning and critical thinking, and especially develop education in the social sciences. On the technological side, the cost of the Internet for teaching and research must be reduced, the reliability of service and satellite connectivity must be improved, and distance learning networks should be restored. The United States-Indonesia Society is trying to contribute to this effort by focusing on the tertiary level and what the university leaders think is needed.

For example, the US-Indonesia Teacher Education Consortium (USINTEC), led by The Ohio State University, is developing crash programs for the certification of teachers that will begin in 2008. The new PhD Presidential Scholars program and the creation of centers for teaching and research excellence have been initiated with the US, other donors, and the World Bank. A new project in university management will be led by the University of Missouri at St. Louis, and we are working to get an agreement between the Education Ministry and PT Telkom Indonesia for service to university Internet hubs. Our effort here is not to leverage massive amounts of aid, but to work with US institutions to "incubate" new and innovative solutions to help the university to meet identified needs.

The more interest there is on the part of the US educational community to get involved on the university level, whether through cooperative degree programs, technical assistance, or other means, the more Indonesian performance competitiveness in this vital sector will improve. ■