

Friday, May 2, 2014

## "A Letter From the *Kampung*"

By Stanley A. Weiss

WASHINGTON, DC- Indonesia has been wracked by a string of seismic and volcanic activity of late --including a 6.0 magnitude quake today in the eastern part of the archipelago nation of 250 million. But with the world's third-largest democracy readying for their fast-approaching 2014 presidential elections, the biggest tectonic shift in Indonesia may be political in nature. All eyes are on Joko (Jokowi) Widodo, the charismatic Governor of Jakarta, as he vies with the popular but as-yet-undeclared former special forces commander General Prabowo Subianto to succeed the term-limited President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Eager for insights into the rapidly-shifting currents of Indonesian presidential politics, I reached out to a Javanese friend, who sent me the following letter.

Java, Indonesia - 1 May 2014

Pak Stanley,

It was the noise, the noise that best described the recent legislative elections here in Old Java.

The noise, not of speeches, not of crowds, but of a thousand un-muffled, and drilled-out, motorcycle exhaust pipes roaring through Central Java's un-interested towns and sceptical villages - their flag waving, bandana-garbed, teen-age riders clad in whichever colored T-shirt that the local political big-wig had paid them to wear - a good day job, if chosen, in a land of massive under-employment.

Now, Java is preparing itself for the 'Big One, the Presidential. But all, supposedly, know that Gov. Jokowi is going to win, so why - after all - should Java get excited. The Javanese might as well all stay gossiping on their verandas; it's a done deal, isn't it?

Well - personally - I don't believe so: Things are never, but never, as they appear to be in Java. We live in a land of shadows, an island of puppetry, within a culture where the Outer Man hides his Inner Man, and this teaches the people to be wise - a lot wiser, in Javanese not Western terms, than their leaders and most journalists think.

The question that many rural folk are today asking is "Who's pulling Jokowi's strings .... Whose puppet is he really?" - Everyone knows you don't get to rise from being a Surakarta antik dealer, to Mayor of Solo, to Governor of Jakarta without a little outside help, and a lot of money; and pak Jokowi doesn't appear to be a very spiritual, nor a very religious man, so his help can scarcely have been granted by Allah the Almighty.

Yes, he is lauded for having visited the job-seeking city cousins when Jakarta flooded back in 2013. Yes, it was the first time the neighbours had ever seen a politician in their dirt-poor city kampung; but Jokowi's

smiling visit did not stop their homes being flooded again this year.

"What has Jokowi actually accomplished", others ask: He is good at getting his photograph in the papers, he's good at kissing babies, but that's not going to put rice on plates, nor make Jakarta's busses run. And if supporters in Jakarta is his claim to fame and the basis for his presidential run, and they are not truly happy nor satisfied with him; then why should their country kin be impressed?

So who's Jokowi's big backer, who is the Dhalang - the puppet master - behind his shadow play? No one even hazards a guess, but most state that it simply cannot be his outward political boss, Ibu Megawati. She may be rich, she may be Bung Karno's daughter, but most accept that she is none too bright, and not so devious as to concoct such a cunning, deceitful, plan. The question may, moreover, never be answered such are the shadows here.

The Javanese are now wiser, and they have always been able to smell a rotting fish. They now further query why it is that a someone is also trying to fool them with a Man of the People - a concept which, in fact and since dawn eternal, does not rest well on the Javanese soul.

The Javanese are not, at heart, impressed by a Man of the People; they want a Man for the People, and a strong one at that.

They intrinsically accept the relationship between Master and Subject, Gusti and Kuwala in Javanese, and they innately understand that whilst Master and Subject differ in their hierarchal and financial positions, they are also equal in that they are mutually dependent.

The 'Kawula' and the 'Gusti' need each other: If their relation is harmonious, then the world will be peaceful and prosperous. But if the relation becomes unequal, civil and economic disorder will rule the world.

They have also learnt from a young age and from their Shadow Puppet plays, of the power of the little people, and of their God given right to fight for justice should the relationship be broken.

One only has to look back to President Suharto's downfall to grasp this - the little people knew well of his voracity and corruption, and accepted it all as long as he himself maintained his side of the bargain, and ensured that their own standard of living grew in line with his. The Asia Crisis of 1997 shattered the bargain, the people rose up, as was their Javanese philosophical right, and Suharto lost his throne in 1998.

All of which brings the little people beautifully and symmetrically back to the enigma that is Prabowo Subianto - Javanese aristocrat, Nationalist, son of a brilliant academic and ex Minister for the Economy under

Suharto, honest multi-millionaire, West Point graduate, ex 3-star Special Forces general and, once upon a time, the most feared and most loathed man in all Indonesia.

Prabowo, the general whom everyone believes - whether it they be factually right or, as I believe, wrong - was responsible for the bloody Jakarta riots in May 1998; the man of steel who had no qualms in having young innocent students murdered - in short, the Devil Incarnate.

But long, a man highly respected - and this is crucial - as a Man of Power.

The concept of Power in Java is different to that in the West. It is of a finite, never changing, eternal, quality and quantity. It has no moral. It has no right or wrong, it is simply 'The Power'. 'It keeps this universe in order, and the legitimacy of the 'King' rests in this Power, and it is to be used by whoever has the guile, and the divine mystical blessing, to grab it.

Power is acquired through mystically charged objects, known as 'pusaka', such as the 'kris' - the prized asymmetrical dagger of Java forged out of meteorite steel. It is garnered through asceticism, through self-control, yoga and 'Samadhi' (meditation). It is also absorbed by being surrounded by others who are known to have the Power, whether shamans, successful tycoons, albinos or dwarfs. Finally, this spiritual Power manifests itself through outward appearances and the evident control of emotions - No kissing of babies there!

The Western world, and Jakarta, may have been shocked to see Prabowo addressing his Gerindra (Great Indonesian Movement Party) supporters, in full para-military uniform including the feared red paratroopers' cap, astride a supposedly \$ 300,000 stallion, but the General knew exactly the value of such an image in the mind of the ordinary Javanese - it conveyed nothing but pure Power.

And now, the people read that Prabowo is meeting with Aburizal Bakrie, one of Indonesia's richest, most successful, non-Chinese entrepreneurs, and the chairman of Golgar, the late President Suharto's megalith political party.

That is not only great alliance building and politics; it is another very clear symbol, another soft spoken yet very loud message, and another acquisition of the Power.

"Do not underestimate Prabowo", the little people now hesitatingly say, adding that perhaps he does truly have The Power, and with it all that this means.

Could Prabowo, perhaps, also have the 'Wahyu', or might there be a sign of the Wahyu' soon to come? Wahyu is, under Islamic law, defined as a divine revelation. In Java, it is the king's "Divine Right", and the mystical - radiant - manifestation that the king, or the one who seeks to be king, possesses that mystical right.

Prabowo is Javanese through and through. He is also recognized, by the highest echelons of the U.S. military amongst others, as having one of the finest tactical minds of anyone, anywhere. He will not, you can be quite sure, have ignored the personal and the tactical importance of the

"Wahyu".

The volcanoes - please do not laugh - may well help his cause: All the peasants are aware that the earth is rumbling. In my own beautiful part of Old Java, three volcanoes within 25 miles are under active alert watch. This is a clear sign that there is a distinct lack of 'harmony' within Nature and, consequently, within the phenomenal world. Only a man with the Wahyu can restore the equilibrium, and nothing is more important in Java and Indonesia than 'harmony'.

The people do not - yet - speak of Prabowo's Wahyu but, as I have written, Prabowo will have already thought of that - it will be interesting to learn what happens and how the General plays it, and play it he will.

Your being American, you may well ask about our dreaded Islamists: Well, forget them; they have blown it. Everyone, but the die-hards, just see the Muslim clerical politicians as a bunch of pornography watching, prostitute consuming, corrupt, self-interested, ineffectual, no-hopers.

The gossips might not scream it out loud, as this would be impolite, and would upset the religious harmony of their village, but it is what they feel inside and laugh about at night, whilst sharing clove 'kretek' cigarettes with their friends.

The only real importance that the over-numerous Muslim parties have is which of the 3 main parties is chosen as a minor sop to convention, to be a coalition partner. If ever the Muslims were all to join as one; they still would not get the majority vote. The Indonesian may love their religion and their mysticism, but they love their pleasure and their lackadaisical, siesta taking, approach to life just as much.

The people certainly do not want any kind of fundamentalism, nationalism perhaps, but Muslim fundamentalism never. One only has to stare at the negligible length of the girls' skirts, after they have removed their jilbabs to meet their boyfriends, to know that!

Journalists and think-tankers in Jakarta will write that these kinds of mystical, culturally based, concepts are no longer of any importance nor relevance in modern day Indonesia but, then again, when was the last time that they stepped out of their air-conditioned offices and cars to share a road-side cup of over-sweet tea with a rural peasant. It is not rural Java that is out of touch with Jakarta, but vice versa.

Do not believe all that you read coming from the so-called experts in the capital, their votes count for nothing. The ones who count are in the warungs and kampungs of the villages and market towns. Their souls are still Javanese - they do not see things as Western political analysts and idealists do, and I very much doubt that their hearts want an Obama-like, manufactured creation.

All in all, Jokowi will not be the next President of Indonesia - whomever his running mate might be. The Indonesian presidential election this July will be far more interesting, and far less predictable, than the experts presently forecast.

I am looking forward to it.

As are we all.