

South East Asia braces for political fallout from Iraq war

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As the Bush administration prepares to launch its war against Iraq, the ruling elites in South East Asia are nervously preparing for the political and economic shocks that are certain to follow. The governments in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia are caught between their need to maintain close ties with Washington and the growing popular resentment and anger over US aggression, which threatens to boil over into widespread protests.

In all three countries, senior political figures have cautiously expressed opposition to any US invasion that does not have the political figleaf of endorsement by the UN Security Council. They have warned of unrest and growing support for fundamentalist Islamic tendencies, including those allegedly involved in terrorist attacks in the region. Concerns have also been raised about the potentially damaging impact of rising oil prices and their consequences for the world economy.

In **Indonesia**, a series of protests, although relatively small in size, have indicated a growing hostility to any US invasion of Iraq. On Sunday, an estimated 7,000 supporters of the Muslim-based Justice Party held a march in Jakarta beginning outside the British embassy and proceeding to the UN office and the US embassy. Protesters held up placards declaring “Stop War on Iraq” and “Save Peace and Humanity”.

In a bid to distance the government from US actions, Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda responded to President Bush’s State of the Union speech by announcing on January 31 that Indonesia has sent envoys to the Middle East and Europe in an effort to oppose the US war drive. Hassan said Indonesia had already approached member states of the Non-Aligned Movement. “We are aware that no war is justifiable, either from legal, political or morality points of view,” he said.

Following US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s address

to the UN last week, Hassan commented: “Indonesia has not seen enough evidence to justify military action against Iraq. Indonesia will not accept any unilateral decision outside the [UN] Security Council.” Vice President Hamzah Haz, head of the Islamic-based United Development Party, has previously voiced similar objections, declaring: “We reject any attack... We hope the United States can restrain themselves and not act unilaterally.”

The two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia—Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah—have indicated their opposition to a US invasion. Their leaders recently refused an invitation to attend an inter-religious US Congressional prayer session scheduled for February 4-7. These conservative organisations, which claim a combined membership of 75 million people in the world’s largest predominantly Muslim country, have had regular high level contacts with US officials in the past.

After Bush’s State of the Union speech, Muhammadiyah head Sjaffii Maarif denounced the US president as “more dangerous than Saddam Hussein” and warned that any war would result in the loss of thousands of Iraqi lives. Clearly worried about the political consequences of a conflict, he recently told the *Jakarta Post*: “It will not only radicalise Indonesians but also people in the Middle East or even in France and Germany. It’s a crime against humanity and will cause universal restlessness.”

Chief Security Minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has warned that any war on Iraq will provoke street protests. Police officials revealed on January 28 that they had formed a special committee to protect foreign interests in Indonesia. Yudhoyono told the *Jakarta Post* the government would do its best to protect the property of the US and its allies, adding: “Our fundamental stance is that we are seriously calling for the Iraqi problem to be

settled peacefully. We do not support any war on Iraq.”

The anti-war statements of figures like Yudhoyono, a former top general, should not be taken at face value. His comments reflect wider concerns in ruling circles that a US war on Iraq will disrupt economic and political ties between the two countries. The military in particular has been seeking to reestablish the close contacts with the US armed forces that it enjoyed under the Suharto dictatorship.

In **the Philippines**, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has strongly supported the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” including US military “training programs” against separatist Muslim rebels in southern Mindanao. A number of prominent political figures, however, have openly voiced their opposition to a US war on Iraq.

On January 31, Vice President Tesfisto Guingona joined the first secretary from the Iraqi Embassy at the head of a 3,000-strong protest in Manila against the war. Guingona retains his position as vice-president even though he resigned last year as foreign minister over the presence of US troops in Mindanao. The previous day, Manila Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Sin appealed to Arroyo to abandon support for the “unjust war efforts” of the Bush administration.

Arroyo was compelled to make a display of public concern for the hundreds of thousands of Filipinos who work in the Middle East and may be caught up in a military conflict. The president dashed off last week for an unscheduled visit to Kuwait to personally check on evacuation plans for the 60,000 Filipinos currently working in the country. Another 120,000 work in the United Arab Emirates and 850,000 in Saudi Arabia. The Philippine government has provided gas masks, food and water supplies for its citizens working in Israel and Kuwait.

Manila is also concerned about the impact of war on the struggling Philippine economy. The government has ordered oil refiners to stockpile 30 days supply and bulk suppliers to hold 15 days. The country receives more than half of its supplies from Saudi Arabia and Iran. Economic Planning Secretary Romulo Neri reported last week that the country’s exports were expected to grow 5-8 percent in 2003 but then warned that “it’s hard to say” if exports would continue to rise in the event of a war with Iraq.

In **Malaysia**, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad responded to Bush’s State of the Union address, by declaring: “We are not convinced, we cannot accept... there is not enough evidence to prove that Iraq has links with Al Qaeda or has weapons of mass destruction.” In an

interview last week, however, he indicated Malaysia would support the US war, saying “if the UN says, so will we.” But he warned that the war would only heighten support for Islamic extremists. “That is why I feel the US should not increase the anger in the Muslim world by attacking Iraq. It does not contribute to the fight against terrorism.”

Mahathir has used Bush’s “war on terrorism” to establish closer ties with Washington and to consolidate his political position at home. He has used the country’s draconian Internal Security Act to detain dozens of people, including opposition politicians, without trial as “terrorist suspects”. The Bush administration has all but dropped any criticism of Mahathir’s jailing of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim on trumped up charges of corruption and sexual misconduct.

But the hostility of many Malaysians to the US war plans has compelled Mahathir to voice some muted criticism. Rather than oppose Washington directly, he has reserved his sharpest barbs for the Australian government and its slavish support for a US-led invasion of Iraq, branding it as America’s “deputy sheriff”. Opposition to a war continues to grow, however, with anti-war rallies planned for this weekend.

In **Thailand**, hundreds of young Muslims held a protest outside the US embassy in Bangkok last week to protest against the drive to war. The group calling itself “Muslims for Peace” carried placards reading “No blood for oil” and “Stop the crazy in the White House” and issued a statement pledging “to take all possible peaceful measures to stop the war”. In the predominantly Muslim areas of southern Thailand, the National Association of Muslim Youth has called for a boycott of US goods.

There is no doubt that in the weeks ahead Washington’s invasion of Iraq and its sabre rattling elsewhere in the world will sharpen the existing social and political tensions in South East Asia.



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