

Australian prime minister travels to Indonesia to boost Labor's anti-refugee witch-hunt

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In his first overseas trip since being reinstated as prime minister on June 27, Kevin Rudd travelled to Indonesia last week in order to elevate the bipartisan witch-hunt against asylum seekers, being conducted by the Labor and Coalition parties, into the centrepiece of the forthcoming federal election campaign.

Both parties are mounting a xenophobic scare campaign, with the full support of a compliant media, in order to erect an impenetrable barrier to refugees seeking to exercise their democratic and legal right to flee persecution and claim asylum. Rudd and opposition leader Tony Abbott are also agreed that punitive measures should be utilised against any who manage to reach Australia—including indefinite detention and preventing them from being employed—as a “deterrent” to other refugees contemplating applying for asylum in Australia.

In a joint communiqué issued after Rudd and Yudhoyono met on Friday, the two leaders “reaffirmed their commitment to continue to develop a regional solution [for asylum seekers], involving countries of origin, transit and destination” and “stressed the importance of avoiding unilateral actions which might jeopardise such a comprehensive regional approach and which might cause operational or other difficulties to any party.”

The reference to “unilateral actions” amounted to a diplomatically coded rebuff to opposition leader Tony Abbott and his plan to have the Australian navy turn asylum boats back into Indonesian waters. Rudd is seeking to establish a point of difference with the Liberals, by opposing this particular tactical aspect of Abbott's policy, while agreeing with the fundamental strategy of blocking all refugee boat arrivals to Australia.

The opposition's immigration spokesman Scott Morrison dismissed the diplomatic statement, bluntly insisting, “you have got to have unilateral action on our side that works.” Yesterday he added that the opposition would be ready to deploy SAS elite military forces to prevent asylum-seeker vessels gaining entry to Australia. Morrison and other Liberal Party figures boasted of the “success” of the former

government of John Howard, when in 2001 it sent SAS forces on board the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa to prevent it carrying hundreds of refugees rescued at sea from landing on Australian territory.

These remarks came after a merchant vessel this week aborted an attempt to return rescued asylum seekers to Indonesia after they threatened suicide. The incident underscored the desperate plight of the vulnerable families who embark on the perilous voyage to Australia, which is made all the more dangerous by the government's reactionary “border protection” regime.

Under successive Labor and Liberal governments, this regime has overseen the drowning of well over a thousand refugees during the past 12 years—whose deaths have been welcomed by politicians as a means of deterring others from making similar voyages. The Liberal Party, backed by the Murdoch media, have repeatedly insisted that the Howard government's policy of towing refugee vessels back to Indonesia “stopped the boats.” The truth is that it was the October 2001 sinking of the “SIEV X”—in which 353 men, women, and children drowned while Australian authorities refused to go to their rescue—that marked the turning point. Then immigration minister Phillip Ruddock notoriously declared at the time that the incident “may have an upside.” After the SIEV X, refugee boat arrivals were reduced to a small trickle.

Under Labor, several other mass drownings have occurred, with no less compelling evidence that authorities knew of, and permitted the deaths of these refugees at sea (see: “Australian government's culpability in refugee boat disaster”). Boat arrivals have nevertheless increased in the past few years, an expression of the explosion in the number of refugees trying to flee war, poverty and persecution, particularly in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, largely due to the criminal military interventions of US imperialism and its allies, including Australia.

Since returning as prime minister, Rudd has indicated he is preparing further illegal crackdowns on asylum seekers, including by arbitrarily redefining the already strict criteria

that determine official recognition as a refugee. In this, he will be supported by a slew of erstwhile “liberal intellectuals”, such as journalist Robert Manne and philosopher Tim Soutphommasane, who last year rushed to back former Prime Minister Julia Gillard when she decided to resuscitate the Howard government’s reactionary “Pacific Solution” of transferring asylum seekers to remote, desolate islands in the Pacific and detaining them there for years. Once outspoken critics of Howard’s refugee policies, these upper middle class layers have moved rapidly to the right—on refugees, on imperialist war and on austerity against the working class.

The vilification of refugees is aimed precisely at creating a reactionary diversion from the preparations being made by both parties for stepped up militarism abroad and deepening attacks on the working class at home. The sudden collapse of the China-fuelled mining export boom has brought the Australian economy to the brink of a major recession, with layoffs and corporate-imposed wage cuts already accelerating across the country. Whichever party wins the election will implement ruthless European-style spending cuts aimed at slashing jobs, working conditions and the living standards of ordinary working people. At the same time, Canberra has unconditionally aligned itself with the Obama administration’s reckless “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific, which is directed at forcibly maintaining Washington’s strategic dominance against its major rival, China.

Rudd’s trip to Indonesia was a prime example of the collaboration between politicians and the media in suppressing any public discussion of these issues. In a barely mentioned speech to a business breakfast, Rudd emphasised Indonesia’s key role in the so-called emerging “Asian Century”, the concept used by the Labor government to advance its demand for boosting Australian capitalism’s “international competitiveness” in the Asian region. The prime minister told the assembled CEOs and officials: “Indonesia is poised to take its place as one of the world’s largest economies... Australian businesses in particular should take note of this. Everywhere we turn, there are remarkable statistics. Today Indonesia has more billionaires than Japan—and more per capita than India or China.”

Rudd also boasted of the developing strategic and military ties between Canberra and Jakarta. In November 2011, when Gillard and US President Barack Obama announced a new US Marine base in the Northern Territory, as part of the anti-China “pivot”, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa expressed concern that this would create a “vicious circle of tension and mistrust” in the region. Indonesia has long-standing diplomatic ties with Washington—going back to the 1965–66 military coup, when

the CIA assisted the junta’s slaughter of more than 500,000 Communist Party members and supporters—but has, more recently, developed close economic relations with China, which could be disrupted by Obama’s aggressive agenda.

Since 2011, Washington and Canberra have expended considerable efforts to keep Jakarta on side. Indonesia recently participated in joint US-Australian military exercises, and in September last year signed a “Defence Cooperation Arrangement.” The joint communiqué issued by Rudd and Yudhoyono “reiterated their commitment to strengthening defence and security cooperation” and “welcomed expanding cooperation, including in strategic policy and planning.”

In the federal election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party is the only party raising the need for the working class to intervene in defence of its own independent interests against austerity and the drive towards war. This requires the unification of the international working class on the basis of its common class interests, against all the efforts of the political and media establishment to split and divide it. The defence of refugees and immigrants is a vital part of this socialist and internationalist perspective. The SEP insists that anyone who wishes to live in Australia, regardless of their nationality, colour or religion, and regardless of whether they are fleeing oppression or seeking to escape poverty and unemployment, has a fundamental democratic right to live and work in the country with full citizenship rights. The defence of this right is inseparable from the defence of the democratic rights of the working class as whole.

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