

Australian government hypocrisy over Indonesia's executions

Peter Symonds
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Indonesian authorities last night carried out the execution by firing squad of eight people convicted of drug offences, including Australian citizens Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, as well as four Nigerians, a Brazilian and an Indonesian. This barbaric act has provoked widespread opposition in Australia.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo ignored appeals for clemency from relatives, questions about Indonesian legal processes as well as on-going court cases, and representations by the Australian, Brazilian and Nigerian governments for the death sentences to be commuted. Just seven months in office and already mired in political crisis, Widodo's "law and order" campaign is directed at cultivating a base of support among a right-wing nationalist and Islamist constituency.

Just as cynical, however, is the way in which the Australian government, along with the entire media and political establishment, has latched onto the plight of Chan and Sukumaran, the grieving of their relatives and the public revulsion over the executions in order to posture as opponents of the death penalty.

Within hours of the executions, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott held a press conference to announce that Canberra was recalling its ambassador to Indonesia and had suspended high-level ministerial contact. Abbott condemned the executions as "cruel and unnecessary," adding: "We respect Indonesia's sovereignty but we do deplore what's been done and this cannot be simply business as usual."

Even before Abbott's media conference, Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten and his deputy Tanya Plibersek issued a joint statement that condemned the executions "in the strongest possible terms" and declared that Australia was "deeply hurt" that its pleas for mercy were ignored. Other politicians followed suit.

Greens leader Christine Milne proclaimed that Australia must "advocate for an end to capital punishment."

The hypocrisy is truly breath-taking. In the first instance, the Australian Federal Police (AFP), in line with the policies of the Howard Liberal government, in which Abbott was a senior minister, was directly responsible for ensuring that Chan and Sukumaran faced the firing squad. The two men, along with seven "drug mules"—the so-called Bali Nine, were arrested in Indonesia in 2005 as a result of information provided by the AFP to Indonesian authorities. The AFP could have waited for the nine to leave Indonesia and made the arrests when they arrived in Australia, where the death penalty does not apply, but chose not to do so, in order to strengthen police and military ties with the Indonesian authorities.

None of the politicians condemning the Indonesian executions has criticised the AFP's role, nor called for a ban on its collaboration with police forces in Indonesia and other countries that impose the death penalty. In fact, the protocols that allowed the AFP to tip off its Indonesian counterparts, despite the likelihood that some or all of the Bali Nine would face the firing squad, have been kept in force over the past decade by Liberal and Labor governments alike.

While condemning the Indonesian government over last night's executions, the Australian government and media routinely ignore the state killings carried out with frightful regularity in the United States, Australia's main ally.

Among the most incendiary coverage in the Australian media is a special edition of Murdoch's Brisbane *Courier Mail* today with a doctored front-page photo of Widodo under the headline "Bloody Hands." Yet the Abbott government, like its Liberal

and Labor predecessors, has its hands covered in blood.

The Australian military has been part of the criminal US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have left hundreds of thousands dead, and millions of parents and relatives grieving over their losses. So closely integrated is the Australian security apparatus into American operations that the US drone assassinations in the Middle East and Asia, carried out in flagrant disregard for American and international law, rely on data provided by the joint Pine Gap spy base in Central Australia.

Last month, the *Australian* revealed that an Australian citizen—Mostafa Farag—was placed on US President Obama’s “kill list” for summary execution with no objection raised by previous Greens-backed Labor government or the present Abbott government.

Just as Indonesian President Widodo is exploiting the executions for his own political ends, Abbott and his ministers have posed as defenders of Chan and Sukumaran out of their own political crisis.

The Abbott government, along with the rest of the political establishment, is widely reviled for its commitment to the US war in the Middle East, its attacks on democratic rights under the bogus “war on terror” and its austerity measures, which have made deep inroads into the social position of the working class. With more cutbacks to essential services due in the annual federal budget on May 12, it is desperate for public credibility on the Indonesian execution issue.

At the same time, Abbott’s government is attempting to ensure that relations with Indonesia are not seriously or permanently damaged. While Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has hinted at a possible cut in aid to Indonesia in the budget, the government has ruled out any change in police and military ties and is under pressure from the corporate elite not to compromise trade and investment. In his statement this morning, Abbott appealed for public restraint. “I would say to people yes, you are absolutely entitled to be angry but we’ve got to be very careful to ensure that we do not allow our anger to make a bad situation worse.”

Neither the Abbott government nor its Indonesian counterpart can necessarily control the sentiments to which they are appealing. Significantly, the American media is paying quite close attention to the Indonesian executions, and particularly to the reaction in Australia.

From its standpoint, Washington cannot afford a rift between Australia—one of the strategic cornerstones of its aggressive “pivot” to Asia—and Indonesia, with which it is seeking closer military ties. The US will undoubtedly be working behind the scenes to prevent a major diplomatic row.



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