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Southeast Asia

Feb 20, 2008



CAMPAIGN OUTSIDER

The Indonesian candidate

By Muhammad Cohen

HONG KONG - Barack Obama took his winning streak to his birth state, Hawaii, this week. On Super Tuesday, Obama won his current home state, Illinois. Earlier that day, he took 75% of the votes in another place that he called home for four years, Jakarta.

Obama's candidacy has generated excitement in Indonesia among the native population as well as among American expatriates.

"To be honest it gives us quite a thrill," journalist Wimar Witoelar says. "We find it difficult to produce great leaders for ourselves so it will be great to produce a president of the USA. I hope he will

invite an Indonesian to his inauguration, and I hope it will be me."

The excitement among Indonesians has little to do with Obama's

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political stance, and most to do with having a person who has lived among them being a strong contender for president of the United States, according to Democrats Abroad Jakarta chair Arian Ardie.

"The excitement comes not so much from his policies or plans, but because he has known Indonesia, he has lived here. It is a strong bond for them and will be an advantage for further strengthening bilateral relations."

Some Jakartans believe the biggest benefits will accrue directly to Uncle Sam if the multicultural Illinois senator - his father is Kenyan, his American mother later married an Indonesian - wins the presidency.

"It would immediately increase America's popularity rating," said Witoelar, who was presidential spokesman for Abdurrahman Wahid, the first freely chosen leader of Indonesia's post-Suharto era. "The George W Bush years will seem like a bad dream. It will reaffirm our faith that America is the land of great people and great ideas."

That reaction will extend far beyond Indonesia, according to TV newsman Dalton Tanonaka, a Hawaii native who ran for office there as a Republican and worked in Hong Kong and Tokyo before coming to Jakarta in 2006. "I believe the time is right for a president who's lived outside of the US for a time, someone raised in a non-white majority," said Tanonaka. "It would ease the anxieties of a lot of people in the world."

Obama's background will help boost his credibility if elected president in much of his international dealings, while also giving him a broad perspective, argues Jakarta businessman and native New Yorker Chris Purdy.

"I believe that having lived in Indonesia, a diverse country with the world's largest Muslim population, Obama will have a certain credibility with many international - including Muslim - leaders around the world. His having lived in Indonesia will, I believe, contribute to his ability to see issues from different perspectives, listen to and understand people who are different, and build bridges to solve common problems."

Even though his exposure to Indonesia was in his early childhood, it would serve to benefit Obama's take on the world, argued Ardie of Democrats Abroad. "Any international experience is good for a presidential candidate," Ardie said. "The US is part of a global economy and part of global society. Understanding how things work outside of the United States, and perhaps sometimes how they don't work, will help any president be a better leader."

Ardie, born in the US and relocated to his father's native Indonesia, may be projecting some of his own background when he says of Obama: "Even though Senator Obama was young when he lived in Indonesia, what he saw, what he experienced shaped his later outlook. It gave him an understanding of the extreme poverty which exists in many parts of the world. It gave him a better understanding of how others perceive Americans and what it means to be an American."

Jakarta will serve as the kickoff point for the inaugural global primary by Democrats Abroad. An estimated 2.5 million registered Democrats living overseas will have 11 delegate votes to choose the nominee. The Indonesian event has been given an assist from Obama's sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, like Ardie an alumnus of Jakarta International School.

Poetry in diversity

Award-winning Indonesian poet and writer Laksmi Pamuntjak sees a further impact on Obama from spending time in a country that has "Unity in Diversity" as its motto.

"Having lived in Indonesia, at the very least, would have acquainted him with the idea of living with difference, as

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Indonesia itself, a modern 20th century invention for all intents and purposes, is made up of some 17,000 islands, some 450 languages, is continuously in flux and is never the 'one' thing - something, in the words of a friend, of a patchwork of old/new, here/there, high tech/new tech materials, and always with a sense of bricolage.

"The young Obama would have probably had an early taste of the vacillations, ambiguities and imperfections of such a place, but also of the richness of viewpoints and interpretations, the struggle with history, and the sense of hope that comes, as young nations always do, from finding oneself anew."

Ati Kisjanto knows as a classmate of "Barry" at central Jakarta's Besuki School what Obama saw in Indonesia firsthand. Kisjanto, a Christian Indonesian, dismisses reports that Besuki was a Muslim madrassa as "baseless. We went to a very moderate school which welcomes Christians and Muslims." The mosque that's now on the school grounds was built long after Barry and Ati left.

"Living in Indonesia, especially being part of an Indonesian family and environment, he mingled with locals, instead of living in an exclusive compound like most US expats in Indonesia nowadays - that enriched his perspective on how the world actually consists of more than one race, one culture, one belief, one idealism," Kisjanto said.

Not so manipulative

Indirectly making a comparison with Paul Wolfowitz, a former US ambassador to Indonesia and architect of the Iraq invasion, Kisjanto said the Obama "will use his background and understanding of other cultures in a positive way rather than in a manipulative way like other US top ranks who've been in Indonesia".

It is only in the past few months that Obama has become a household name in the US, yet he is already hardly less well-known in Indonesia.

"The first point that is striking is how many Indonesians even know who Obama is," Purdy said. "He is well known and, having lived here, earns a special place in the heart of most Indonesians. They like the fact that his step-father was Indonesian, his half-sister is Indonesian. There is certainly a cultural affinity because of Obama's experience."

Even so, few in Indonesia have any idea of what Obama's positions are, points out an Indonesian feminist now living in the US. She fears he could contribute to the wrong side of Indonesia's struggle between Islamism and pluralism. "The fact that Obama has Muslim heritage and that he is playing soft on security issues doesn't make us confident he will be effective and strong in combating extremism in Indonesia and around the world."

In comparison, Hillary Clinton, Obama's Democrat rival for the US presidency, "has a commitment in the women's movement and has worked hard on this issue with us. We think she will help women in Muslim countries more effectively and will have the guts to face the fundamentalists who are trying hard to cover us every where in the world, even in the US.

"Frankly, I don't think Obama has learned anything from Indonesia," said the feminist, who asked for her name to be withheld. "He has never mentioned Indonesia in his interviews or his Muslim heritage. He is proud about his African-American heritage, but never talks about Indonesia."

Obama's website dedicates thousands of words to countering claims that he is really a Muslim, challenges that may play a part in his reticence to refer to his Indonesian experience.

"It is sad that having witnessed other cultures and religions can be used as a potential weapon against any candidate,"

Democrats Abroad's Ardie laments. He reminds voters: "Some of best presidents have lived abroad."

Former broadcast news producer **Muhammad Cohen** told America's story to the world as a US Information Agency diplomat and is author of Hong Kong On Air (www.hongkongonair.com), a novel set during the 1997 handover about television news, love, betrayal, high finance and cheap lingerie.

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An advertisement for 'Native Teachers' featuring four portraits of teachers and the text 'Post your jobs & have hundreds of Serious Teachers apply instantly!'. The text 'Native Teachers' is in large yellow font at the top. Below it are four small portraits of diverse individuals. At the bottom, the text 'Post your jobs & have hundreds of Serious Teachers apply instantly!' is in red. At the very bottom, there are two small links: 'www.SeriousTeachers.com' and 'Feedback - Ads by Google'.

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