

Ties boil over Suharto wealth — again

Australian-Indonesian relations are again on the boil, just five months after a diplomatic tiff over the same subject — Indonesian President Suharto's financial dealings.

This time the Australian Government and Indonesia's Ambassador to Australia August Marpaung were both taken by surprise by Indonesia's decision to suspend landing rights for RAAF aircraft.

Speaking on ABC radio's *The World Today* program yesterday, Mr Marpaung said: "The only thing I know about this is what I read in the newspapers here."

Indonesia advised the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on Wednesday that RAAF aircraft would not be allowed to land "for the time being" but gave no reason for the ban nor any indication of how long it might last.

THE reason for Indonesia's decision can only be speculated, but it is believed to have been sparked by publication of a book *Indonesia — the Rise of Capital* by West Australian academic Dr Richard Robison.

The book lists business dealings of the Suharto family and implies criticism of some of these dealings.

In April, the Australian people were treated to the spectacle of the Indonesian government's outrage at an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Like Dr Robison's book, the article, by David Jenkins, documented the giant fortune amassed by Suharto and his cronies.

The Indonesian response was not to give facts to deny the allegations, but rather to try to suppress these sorts of revelations by diplomatic pressures, by stopping visa-free entry to Indonesia and by banning Australian journalists from the country.

While the Australian government in this case defended the freedom of the press in Australia, the irony is that the Australian government's past behaviour has been one of acquiescence to all sorts of crimes and human rights abuses in Indonesia.

The Australian Government's foreign policy on Indonesia is riddled with contradictions. Defence planners consider that low-level military harassment by Indonesia, though assessed as unlikely, is one of more serious and difficult threats which may arise in the next decade or two. While the Australian government rhetorically defends freedom and democracy, it has also tolerated and indeed cultivated the authoritarian and militaristic Indonesian regime for over two decades.

By **DR BRIAN MARTIN**, a lecturer in the History and Philosophy of Science Department at Wollongong University.

The Suharto military government in Indonesia came to power in 1965 in a bloodbath of mammoth proportions. Between half a million and a million people died in an attack on 'communists' and many others. The Australian government did little to protest at the time or since, although this was one of the largest massacres in the world since World War II.

Since that time the Indonesian government has attempted to crush any threat to its power. Massive numbers of political prisoners were kept for many years in inhuman conditions, as documented by Amnesty International.

The military rulers support the other prevailing systems of privilege and power, in particular exploitation of peasants by landowners and of factory workers by capitalists.

Elections are only a facade. Those who are most outspoken in opposition to the government face imprisonment or death. The result is a widespread fear among the populace.

All this would be hard to sustain without support from other governments and multinational corporations. The United States and Australian governments have been among those who have provided the Indonesian regime investment — military equipment and international credibility.

In 1975 Indonesian military forces invaded East Timor to take over the newly independent country. The Indonesian aggression eventually led to mass starvation and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, a large fraction of the population of East Timor.

Indonesian troops routinely used torture and summary execution against Fretelin, the resistance force. Yet Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal, have done their best to turn a blind eye to this gross violation of international law and human rights. Fretelin's resistance in East Timor continues today, and the Australian government continues to fail to support it, preferring instead to kowtow to the Indonesian rulers.

The Australian government took a similarly subservient line in the Philippines. The Marcos government was widely recognised as a corrupt and brutal regime, which supported landlords against peasants, promoted large development projects (with large payoffs to Marcos and friends)

which would mainly benefit the rich, and did everything it could to suppress democratic opposition including the use of torture and execution.

IN retrospect, a much better policy would have been to support democratic opposition forces within the Philippines. Such a policy makes even more sense in relation to Indonesia. A more democratic society in Indonesia would almost certainly pose less of a military threat to Australia than military rulers.

In case after case, it has been counterproductive for governments to support repressive rulers: the people suffering under these rules are not blind to the role of other governments, and understandably they turn against them once the rulers are deposed.

This happened in Iran: United States support for the Shah's brutal regime led to the bitter anti-Americanism of the Iranians even though the Islamic regime, which followed the Shah, is a ruthless one itself.

This phenomenon has occurred in country after country, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua. Support for a ruthless government is hardly the way to win admiration from the people in a country.

What can Australians do to promote a more democratic society in Indonesia? The first and most important thing is to speak up in support of democratic forces there. Indonesia is not a monolithic society. There are substantial opposition forces, including labour activists, religious groups and intellectuals. They provide a real restraint on the Suharto government.

The democratic opposition is greatly aided by any support it receives from overseas. The Australian government has largely kept quiet, thereby aiding the Indonesian rulers.

But the small support groups in Australia and elsewhere provide continual encouragement for dissidents in Indonesia. When support becomes stronger, or when major criticisms of the Indonesian government are made, this changes the balance of power. This is why such a fuss was made over an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The Australian government could take a number of steps to provide support for the democratic opposition. It could stop military aid to Indonesia



● Indonesian President Suharto whose personal wealth again has caused a rift in relations between Australia and Indonesia.

and publicly condemn human rights abuses and the occupation of East Timor.

Furthermore, it could allow private groups to establish radio broadcasts which could reach Indonesia.

None of these steps are very diplomatic in themselves. Indeed, they are precisely the sort of steps taken to oppose human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and to oppose the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

But even such seemingly small steps could have a major impact in promoting moves towards a more democratic society in Indonesia. It seems the least that we should do.