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By Andre Vltchek

Two appalling concrete structures are sprouting from the lush grass of one of the finest botanic gardens in Southeast Asia. The stench of fresh asphalt is overpowering the gentle scent of tropical flowers; heavy mobile cranes are intruding where, just a few days ago, couples and families came to spend quiet days admiring giant water lilies, as well as varieties of orchids, palms and bamboos.

Construction at the Bogor Botanical Garden

President Bush is supposed to visit Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, on November 20, although the exact date and time have not been officially confirmed for security reasons. Dramatic choreography seems to be what matters to the Indonesian government: the president of the only world empire will descend from the sky to a tropical paradise in the middle of Bogor, a mountainous city 40 miles from the capital, Jakarta.

The historic Bogor Botanical Garden will be closed to the public, mobile communication in the area will be interrupted, and surrounding streets will be emptied and guarded by some 20,000 police and army personnel. Children from nearby schools will be ordered to stay home. After landing, President Bush will be rapidly transported to Bogor Presidential Palace, which lies within the Garden, for a top-level meeting with his Indonesian counterpart Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Bogor Palace was a particular favorite of President Sukarno. Ironically, this is where Indonesia's first president lived under house arrest from 1967 to his death in 1970, after the 1965 US-backed military coup brought General Suharto to power in a bloodbath that took the lives of between 500,000 and 3 million Communists, leftists, atheists, teachers and bystanders, crushing all progressive trends in Indonesia. Understandably, President Bush prefers not to stay the night at Bogor Palace: his visit is planned to last just ten hours.

A few minutes' walk from the Palace, in front of the Bogor convention center, a large slogan depicts a skull and two crossed swords. "We wish that Bush will be possessed by spirits and fall victim to black magic." Signed, the "Native Front."

"Black magic" banner in Bogor

Edwin, an office worker passing by hand-in-hand with his girlfriend, frowns at the slogan, then approaches me and exclaims, "Those guys are crazy. They don't think about our people. People need jobs, a good economy, and welfare. Indonesia might be able to get loans from the United States."

I recall my meeting with John Perkins two years ago in New York. He reminisced about his life as an "economic hit man," beginning right here in Indonesia. Using "money, sex and alcohol," he convinced Indonesian officials and businessmen to accept large, unnecessary loans that could never be repaid. When the scheme succeeded, Indonesia fell under the control of US businesses and government. Edwin is not aware that despite "black magic" slogans, the Indonesian government will have no problem amassing new loans if it so desires.

Indonesian Islamic Movement chief Habib Abdurahman Assegaf has offered a more concrete warning than black magic: "We will form a human barricade to stop Bush from setting foot on our land," he said, posing for a group of photojournalists.

President Bush is hardly a popular figure in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation. Opinion polls show that the majority of Indonesians do not presently have a favorable opinion about the United States. Ma'ruf Amin, deputy chairman of the Indonesian Council of Ulamas (MUI), was recently quoted by the state Antara news agency as saying,

"We are aware of the tradition that guests should be honored and welcomed, but we would prefer if the government did not invite people who hurt Muslims around the world . . . The resentment is natural, given Bush's actions, such as the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and his support for Israel . . ."

Protesters in Bogor on November 11

Protests now regularly shake Bogor, with hundreds of Muslims demonstrating against the Bush visit. The protesters accuse him of terrorism and war crimes. Some banners read, “Bush is the real terrorist.” Often the language is more colorful.

Those presently protesting against US foreign policy are mainly members of Islamist groups and parties, although some students and leftists are expected to join as the visit nears. The Indonesian left was thoroughly destroyed in the post-1965 era. Indonesia’s PKI, one of the largest Communist Parties in the world, was banned and its members ruthlessly hunted down, killed or jailed. Also suppressed were words like “class” (in case someone were to mention “class struggle”) and “atheism.” In subsequent years, no political party has challenged the free-market economics associated with the Suharto regime or its successors.

History was fully manipulated, turned on its head, with the Communist Party blamed for the 1965 coup and the US role in reversing Sukarno’s course barely mentioned. Forty years after the pogrom, it is unthinkable to hear references to the slaughter of 1965–66 or the mass killings conducted by Indonesian forces in East Timor, Papua and Aceh in the classroom or in the media.

As a result of extreme free-market policies, unbridled corruption and feudal-style rule by local elites, Indonesia remains one of the poorest nations in Asia. Even according to understated government statistics, some 25% of the population lives on less than one dollar a day, the World Bank’s benchmark for poverty. In the latest UNDP Human Development Index (2006, with data available from 2004), Indonesia ranks 108th—just above Vietnam, which is still recovering from both the “American War” and the collapse of the Communist Bloc—and far below its Asian neighbors Singapore (25th), Malaysia (61st) and Thailand (74th).

Despite a consistently appalling human rights record, increasing intolerance and flexing of muscles by religious groups (including enforcement of unconstitutional religious sharia bylaws in several parts of the country), as well as an acute lack of democracy during the Suharto era and since, Indonesia is continuously hailed by the US as a modernizing country, a moderate Muslim state and a democratic society.

Soldiers at Bogor Botanical Garden

The US recently lifted its arms embargo against Indonesia, while describing this fourth most populous nation on earth as a key ally in Southeast Asia: an area designated by Washington as the second front in the war on terror, despite accusations that certain extremist groups are closely linked to security forces and the fact that Indonesian justice was surprisingly lenient towards Islamic radicals involved in Bali and other bombings.

Islamist groups and institutions are sometimes the only sources of support and help for the

Indonesian poor. Madrasahs—religious schools—in many parts of the country provide the only relatively affordable education. For many, mosques are the only places of social and public gathering in a country where almost everything "public" has been liquidated or privatized. Similar trends can be observed in other nations where secular and progressive governments were destroyed and replaced by pro-business feudal ruling elites, often with direct intervention from outside.

The Indonesian public is increasingly turning to religion in the wake of the collapse of the social net, as justice is perceived to be corrupt and arbitrary. And some Muslim religious leaders are vocal in their outrage at the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the pressure on Iran and what is seen here as blind and unconditional support for Israel. Once allies in the "war against Communism" in the 1960s, Muslim religious leaders, now enraged over US foreign policy, may actually help to break the old pro-business alliance between the US and Indonesian elites. What could emerge from the ruin of this "unholy alliance" is uncertain, but one may be confident that it will not be a socially responsive, democratic and secular state.

Bush will visit Indonesia on just a brief stopover, after attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Vietnam. No list of topics for discussion has been made public, but both governments are trying to emphasize the "goodwill" of the powerful if suddenly uncomfortable Indonesian ally.

The US Ambassador in Jakarta, Lynn Pascoe, recently proclaimed, "The US wants Indonesia to succeed. We are willing to help. For example, last week we announced the agreement on Millennium Challenge Cooperation that gives a grant of US$55 million to the Indonesian government." Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda said Mr. Bush and Mr. Yudhoyono would discuss social, education and health issues such as how to fight the spread of bird flu.

Both sides are desperately trying to downplay differences and the growing resentment that the Indonesian public feels towards US foreign policy. What is constantly highlighted is the sudden willingness of the United States to help Indonesia sort out its terrible social morass. For Indonesian government and elites, there is much at stake. A citizens' challenge of US foreign policy could be just the beginning of something that could engulf the domestic order.

In the past, Indonesians were made to believe that the US was their natural ally. The nation fought Communism and defended the idea of free trade and free-market economics throughout the world. After killing or silencing opposition, Indonesian elites and military managed to scare the nation into believing that Communism (together with all other left-wing and progressive "isms") was evil and that extreme pro-business policies were the only road to prosperity and development. The Indonesia of Suharto and his successors supported the US on those grounds. Palestine was always an issue, but never a crucial one. But after 9-11 and the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and given the growing danger of confrontation between the US and Iran, as well as the recent Israeli incursion in Lebanon, the Middle East and American actions in the Muslim world have emerged as explosive issues for Indonesia's increasingly religious citizens.

Social desperation, religious fervor and outrage over American actions in the Middle East could trigger events feared by both Indonesian and US elites. What could begin with questioning of US foreign policy, could end with challenging

the entire dysfunctional and brutal social and economic system that has left the great majority of Indonesian citizens dirt poor and with almost no protection.

Protesters in Bogor on November 11

Bush can be expected to offer help, disperse funds, talk about fighting diseases. No sensitive issues will be discussed, at least not openly. Human rights violations, even military cooperation and the "war on terror" will all be secondary, at least in the public discourse. Dominant will be talk about "close ties," goodwill and economic "aid."

Indonesian politicians are aware that they will be skating on thin ice. Vice President Jusuf Kalla, a ruthless businessman from Sulawesi with close ties to several radical religious groups, has said that receiving Bush does not mean Indonesia has the same stance as the US on every issue.

Mr. Kalla offered this thought: "We have good relations, and that has been possible despite some differences we may have had on issues, such as the war in Iraq or the nuclear program of Iran." (*Jakarta Post*, November 11).

For the poor, preparations for the Bush visit did not start well.

Didin, an old man who sells traditional sweets from a makeshift stall just a few blocks from the Palace, feels cheated: "It's going to be a big event. We will have to relocate and nobody is going to give us any compensation."

No compensation will be given to the owners of small telephone centers, street vendors, photographers offering touristy snapshots of the Botanic Garden, or to hundreds of poor men and women working along the streets and avenues surrounding the Palace.

After finishing his prayer at a nearby mosque, Aziz, a government employee, smiles through his decaying teeth. "There are pros and cons to the Bush visit. Personally I can only pray that Allah will open Bush's heart so he can feel empathy with other people."

The mosque is painted white. It is clean. Just a few feet away stands a bridge over a deteriorating railway track covered with garbage. A few rusty metal shacks are called home by several families. Two minutes' drive from here, Mr. Bush will offer his speech, doubtless underlining strong friendship between his country and Indonesia and stressing Indonesia's tremendous progress toward democracy.

His speech will make some people proud, and others will turn their heads in disbelief, wondering what country he is talking about. Then he will board his helicopter and ascend toward the sky. Below him, on the ground, will remain outrageously ugly helipads that will be more expensive to remove than they were to build. Nothing will change: Indonesia will be left to struggle without direction. The great majority will remain poor; a small group of those who rule will drive their German luxury

cars past the shantytowns.

Of course there are other scenarios. One that many fear has already occurred several times in the last few years: howling ambulance sirens, screams, blood on the pavement, police barricades and bomb squads. To be sure, the security-driven agenda, choreographed to the second, may come off like clockwork. Still, anything is possible in the longer run. Desperately poor Indonesia is like a time bomb with no precise timing mechanism: no one can predict when it will go off.

Andre Vltchek filed this report for Japan Focus from Bogor and Jakarta. A novelist, journalist and filmmaker, Vltchek is co-founder of Mainstay Press, a publishing house for political fiction. His recent books include the novel Point of No Return and a book of political essays, Western Terror: From Potosi to Baghdad. He produced a 90-minute documentary film about Suharto's dictatorship and its impact on present-day Indonesia called Terlena—Breaking of a Nation. A senior fellow at the Oakland Institute, he lives and works in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. He can be reached at andre-wcn@usa.net.

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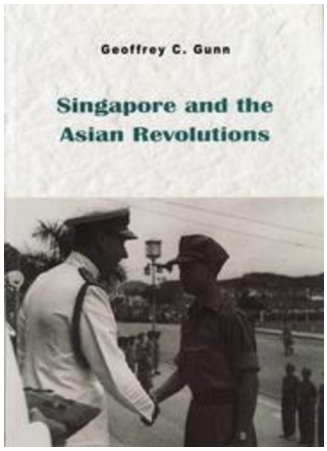

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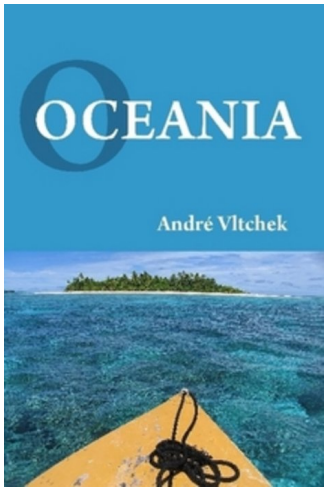

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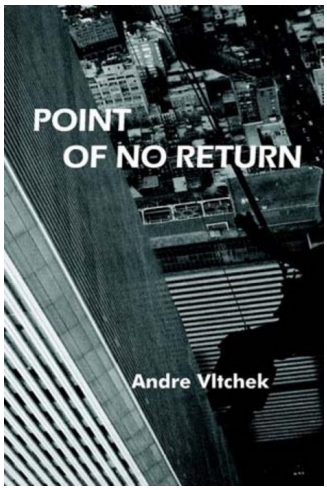

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