

Why Obama should speak in Indonesia

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During last year's US presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised that in the early days of his administration he would 'travel to a major Islamic forum and deliver an address to redefine our struggle'.

'I will make clear,' he promised, 'that we are not at war with Islam, that we will stand with those who are willing to stand up for their future, and that we need their effort to defeat the prophets of hate and violence... My message will be clear: "You matter to us. Your future is our future. And our moment is now."'

Cynics will say you can't fight terrorism with cue cards. Yet President Obama's remarkable candidacy was built, to a significant degree, on the quality of his speeches. He has an old-fashioned faith in the power of rational argument. What did he do at the lowest point of his campaign, when he was forced by the incendiary sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright to confront the treacherous issue of race? Other candidates might have scheduled a doorstep. Obama rented a hall in Philadelphia and wrote some remarks.

If it's a good idea to give this kind of speech, where should he give it? This question is becoming a popular parlour game among foreign policy wonks, with credible cases being assembled for Egypt, Turkey and Qatar. Obama has already visited Turkey, and touched on the question. However, for the defining address he has promised, the strongest candidate of all is the country where he lived as a child: Indonesia.

Choosing Indonesia would throw light on the diversity and richness of Islam. Contrary to lingering popular perceptions, Islam is not practised solely by Arabs nor only in the Middle East. Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, does a reasonable job of managing its considerable religious heterogeneity. Delivering such an important speech outside the Middle East would help Obama to reframe the debate in the West about Islam and terrorism. The venue would reinforce the message.

Doing it outside the Arab world would draw criticisms that Obama is not taking his message to Islam's heartland. Yet precisely because Indonesia is out of the mainstream, its selection would cause no offence to the countries not chosen.

An Indonesian audience would also make sense. Indonesians have been both perpetrators and victims of terrorism, notably the suicide bombings in Bali in 2002 and 2005, and in Jakarta in 2004. The Indonesian government is an important partner in the struggle against terrorism.

Selecting Indonesia would demonstrate that Obama takes democracy seriously. After all, Indonesia is a bustling, rowdy democracy – the world's largest, after India and the United States. Speaking there would show that President Bush's misshapen democratisation agenda has not turned his successor into an icy realist.

Obama could undermine anti-Americanism

Reminding the world of his origins by taking Air Force One to Indonesia would help Obama to undermine anti-Americanism. Who would have thought that the United States would elect a president who says he is 'haunted' by memories of 'the feel of packed mud under bare feet as I wander through paddy fields; the sight of day breaking behind volcanic peaks; the muezzin's call at night and the smell of wood smoke; the dickering at the fruit stands alongside the road; the frenzied sound of a gamelan orchestra, the musicians' faces lit by fire'? Talk about coming from a place called Hope!

Finally, a trip to Indonesia would demonstrate that Obama is serious about rebalancing America's foreign policy and taking a fresh look at the world. It would show that he understands the shift of global power eastwards – a shift that need not marginalise the United States. And it would telegraph that under his administration, Washington is finally going to take Indonesia seriously – a country which is, after all, the lynchpin of South-East Asia. This would be very much in Australia's interests.

Much of the foreign policy chapter in Obama's book, *The Audacity of Hope*, is devoted to a rich description of a country which he has said 'was for me, as a young boy, a magical place'. Yet he also admits that 'most Americans can't locate Indonesia on a map'.

President Obama was criticised during the campaign as offering speeches rather than solutions. But there is no better way to make an argument than with a speech – and for this speech, there is no better place to make that argument than Indonesia.

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