

Cementing bilateral ties

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TM HAMZAH THAYEB began his career at the ASEAN National Secretariat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Indonesia. He has previously held the posts of Head of Political Division at the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia in New York and Director-General for Asia, Pacific and African Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has also served as Ambassador to Australia and currently holds the post of Ambassador to both the UK and Ireland.

Sir Winston Churchill once said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. With our declaration of independence in 1945, it was Indonesia's turn to try democracy. Shortly thereafter, in 1949, Indonesia established formal diplomatic ties with the UK, the world's oldest democracy. After Indonesia recalibrated its political and social landscape through a major reform process in 1998, now Indonesia is considered by many as the third largest democratic country in the world with a vibrant and growing economy.

As two nations that share a similar democratic vision, our bilateral relations have grown prominently over the years. Ranging from economics to education, to cooperation in the fields of inter-faith dialogue, moderatism and climate change, the UK has become one of Indonesia's closest and reliable partners in addressing global issues, problems and challenges.

This year, the solid partnership and friendly relations between the two nations have been further intensified by visits of high-ranking officials from both sides. The UK Prime Minister himself came to Indonesia last spring. During their meeting in Jakarta in April, Prime Minister David Cameron and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono once again reiterated their mutual commitment to work together to foster world peace and prosperity. Both leaders, with Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, are now co-chairing the UN High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on Post 2015 Development Agenda. For our part, Indonesia is determined to promote the shared vision of equitable development and sustainable growth.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's State Visit to the UK, on behalf of 240 million Indonesians, will confirm this bond. This will be the second State Visit by an Indonesian President since the late President Suharto visited the UK in 1979. The State Visit definitely signifies Indonesia's commitment to the bilateral relationship, during which significant plans for cooperation will forge a closer partnership based on mutual respect and equality, shared values and common interests.

At present, both Indonesia and the UK are members of the G-20, each representing the world's most important emerging and developed economies. With the UK being the 7th largest economy in the world, and Indonesia as the largest economy in the ever-

vibrant Southeast Asian region, the two nations are ideal partners in forming a strategic bridge between Asia and Europe. As many have observed, Asia Pacific's economy has continued to grow despite the global economic slowdown. Indonesia's economic growth is also predicted to even outperform the region's average. Such robust economic performance has attracted trade and investment from the UK, among others. Indonesia is indeed regarded as one of Britain's main investment destinations. Over the years, the UK has an annual investment of more than US\$ 400 million in Indonesia, and the total bilateral trade between the two countries has reached almost US\$ 3 billion.

One may ask, is there still room for growth? I am personally very optimistic that we can still increase the trade and investment volume significantly. Indonesia continues to offer huge opportunities for UK-based companies in various sectors such as food processing, food crops and plantation, rubber production, plastic, metal, machineries and electronics, and transportation. On the other hand, Indonesian companies see the UK as a strategic gateway to Europe.

I also want to emphasise that beyond the economic ties, our countries' bilateral relation has also been nurtured by dynamic people-to-people contact. Over 8,000 Indonesians work and study in the UK at the moment. Young and bright Indonesians pursue their degrees in universities and higher education institutions in the UK, known for its world-class education system. The Indonesian government, at the same time, offers extensive opportunities for British scholars to learn more about Indonesia. Since 1974, through the Darmasiswa scholarship programme, we have provided more than 100 scholarships to teach the fascinating Indonesian culture and language. Students, I am convinced, serve as the real bridge-builders between the two countries and the two cultures.

Ever since my arrival as Indonesian Ambassador to the Court of St James's, I have pledged to achieve concrete results as a testament to the working bilateral cooperation. The whole team at the Embassy and I are truly committed and honoured to offer our services in broadening and strengthening the bilateral relations between the two democracies. By working together with our partners here, we can strive towards a strengthened relationship, mutually beneficial cooperation and a brighter future.

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