

Australia
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NOT HOWARD'S END

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HAD THE IRAQ war been the only issue in the Australian general election, Prime Minister John Howard might well have lost his bid for another term. Most Australians opposed the decision to join the United States-led coalition in the invasion of Iraq. The United States President, George W. Bush, witnessed their anger first-hand when he visited Canberra last year and was greeted by the biggest protest demonstration in the country since the Vietnam War. Australia did not suffer any casualties — of 2,000 Australian troops who joined the coalition forces in invading Iraq, only about 350 remain in that country — and its people are all for friendly relations with the U.S. But they resent the manner in which their leader followed Mr. Bush into the war and believe it has turned the country into a potential target for terrorists, a fear heightened by last month's bombing outside the Australian Embassy in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. The 43 former defence chiefs and diplomatic officials who released a statement that their Government sent troops to Iraq under "false assumptions" were only articulating a widely held view. Prime Minister Howard's partners in the war — President Bush, who is facing an extremely tough presidential election, and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who will seek a third term for his Government next year — have been quick to congratulate their ally on his victory. But by no means is Mr. Howard's victory in last Saturday's election, which gave him and his conservative Liberal-National coalition a historic fourth term in office, an endorsement of his policy on Iraq.

The main issues in this election related to domestic policy and the state of the economy. Under Mr. Howard's watch, Australia has seen an extraordinary period of prosperity, with growth rates climbing and unemployment falling. He won the 2001 election with a strong chauvinistic

campaign against asylum-seekers. But aware of the increasing public concern over such a stand and resentment over the Iraq war, the 64-year-old Liberal Party leader, known as Australia's shrewdest politician, kept his re-election campaign focussed on his Government's economic achievements. His opponent, the leader of the Labour Party, Mark Latham, suffered the drawback of being a newcomer trying to unseat an incumbent at a time of economic well-being. Both sides had competitive policies on education and health care, which were also significant issues in this election. But in a country where most people are in debt, the conservative coalition managed to play on fears that voting in Labour would lead to higher mortgage rates and taxes. In the end, the country decided to stick to the proverbial known devil, preferring continuity to change on economic issues. But boosted by his victory, the Prime Minister has signalled that there will be no change in his foreign policy: in his victory speech, he sought to vindicate his war alliance with the U.S. and Britain, with a reference to the holding of elections in Afghanistan.

Australia has opted for government change only thrice after the Second World War. It is a tribute to the dynamic leadership of the 41-year-old Labour leader that every opinion poll first gave Mr. Latham the lead over Mr. Howard and subsequently showed the contest as a dead heat. After seeming so close to winning these elections, Labour will be devastated by the fourth consecutive defeat, compounded by the loss of seats in traditional strongholds. But the party, and Mr. Latham personally, can take comfort from the fact that they gave Prime Minister Howard an extremely tough run — in fact, it was impossible to predict the winner until a few hours before the election — although the verdict ultimately went against them.

THE HINDU

10 OCT 2004

Jakarta blast aimed at elections

By David Fickling

SYDNEY, SEPT. 10. Coming two weeks into Australia's election campaign, the Jakarta embassy bombing led to immediate suspicions yesterday that it was designed as a repeat of the Madrid train bombings in March.

That attack was credited with turning the tide of opinion against Jose Maria Aznar's Government, which like Australia, had been a key supporter of the Iraq war. But the Indonesian presidential elections on September 20 are believed to be a more likely target for the bombers than the October 9 Australian election.

General distrust

Much more probable is the scenario that the Australian embassy was targeted because of the general distrust of Australia within Indonesia. Beneath a cordial veneer, Australia's relations with In-

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Indonesia have been rocky ever since John Howard's Government came to power in 1996. That poll replaced the pro-Indonesian Paul Keating with the frostier Mr. Howard, and also saw the emergence of Pauline Hanson's xenophobic One Nation party.

"The Howard Government remains one of the most unpopular foreign Governments in Indonesia," says Greg Fealy, an expert on regional affairs at the Australian National University (ANU). "The two countries certainly work together as neighbours, but it's pragmatic. There's no warmth in the relationship."

Relations between Jakarta and Canberra reached a nadir in 1999 when Australia sent troops into East Timor to restore order after an independence referendum marred by the violent reprisals of pro-Indonesian militias.

Many Indonesians feared that Timorese independence would lead to the disintegra-

tion of their country, and believed Australia was encouraging this break-up through its involvement in East Timor.

That conspiracy theory is thought to be common even in certain circles of Government. The ringleader, Imam Samudra, told his trial last year: "Australia has taken part in efforts to separate East Timor from Indonesia which was an international conspiracy by followers of the (Christian) cross."

Improved relations

Paradoxically, the Bali bombing improved relations between the two neighbours to a level which they had not reached in years, as Australian police were flown to Indonesia to help their local counterparts with the investigation.

Mr. Howard's closeness to the U.S. Government and enthusiastic involvement in the Iraq war have only increased

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fears among Australia's predominantly Muslim Asian neighbours that the country is alien to the region.

Howard's image

The stance was most damagingly embodied in the image of Mr. Howard as Washington's deputy sheriff, a label which the Australian Prime Minister has accepted and which George Bush inadvertently endorsed last year.

Many Indonesians share the feelings of Canberra's most persistent antagonist, the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad.

"Australia has to choose whether it's an Asian country or a Western country," he told the *Australian* newspaper in November 2002.

"If you take the position of being a deputy sheriff to America, you cannot very well be accepted by the countries of this region." — ©Guardian Newspapers Limited 2004

Australia steps up security

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Agence France-Presse
Jakarta, September 10

A SUICIDE bomber was behind the blast at Australia's embassy in Jakarta that left nine dead and almost 180 injured, the police said. Canberra has ramped up security measures.

As Australia's foreign minister toured the scene of yesterday's powerful blast and forensic experts began sifting through blood-spattered

wreckage, Prime Minister John Howard vowed to defy militant threats against his country. Howard, who faces elections next month in which Iraq is a key issue, said his country would not falter in its commitment to the campaign, despite claims that the embassy attack was a warning by Islamic extremists to pull out troops.

Howard also warned of the "distinct possibility" Islamic militants would strike again in Jakarta and announced a series of fresh counter-terrorism moves at home and abroad. He stopped short of raising the overall domestic terror alert level, which is currently assessed as "medium", but said Australia will create new emergency response teams and upgrade measures at airports and overseas missions.

Howard also said Indonesian police had been warned of an attack on a Western embassy shortly ahead of the bombing, which came three days before the third anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

Australian police officials said early evidence pointed to the involvement of the al-Qaida-linked Jemaah Islamiyah group blamed for the Bali bombings in October 2002.



AP

ALERT: A Philippine National Police personnel guards the US Embassy in Manila after Thursday's bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta.

Australia under attack

9 KILLED, 173 INJURED IN JAKARTA EMBASSY BOMBING



THURSDAY TERROR: The Australian flag flutters near the broken windows of a building destroyed by an explosion in front of the Australian embassy next door in Jakarta on Thursday. (Below) Doctors and nurses attend on a bombing victim at a Jakarta hospital. — AFP

Jakarta Post/ANN & AP

JAKARTA, Sept. 9. — In a devastating strike on a key US ally in the Iraq war, Al-Qaida-linked militants detonated a car bomb outside the Australian embassy here today, killing nine people and wounding 173.

The bombing, the first attack linked to regional terror group Jemaah Islamiyah in more than a year, could affect next month's Australian elections, where Prime Minister Mr John Howard is running on a pro-US, anti-terror platform in a tight race.

Police said the bomb exploded shortly after 10:15 a.m. (local time), just metres from the embassy gates, flattening a section of the steel fence and shattering scores of windows in buildings up to 500 metres away.

Most of the dead were Indonesian policemen, embassy security guards and passers-by. The injured were mainly office workers from nearby buildings.

No one inside the heavily

fortified building was killed, although several Australian, Greek and Chinese citizens were wounded in the attack that occurred two days before the 9/11 anniversary.

National police chief Gen. Dai Bachtiar said the blast bore the hallmark of a

capture for nearly three years.

Australia is a key regional supporter of Washington's war on terrorism and Mr Howard is facing criticism in the campaign over his decision to join USA in the Iraq war, which his opponents say has made

how the blasts would affect Australia's 9 October federal election. Mr Howard is considered stronger on national security than his challenger, Mr Mark Latham — who has pledged to bring the troops in Iraq home before Christmas — and may benefit from the perception that Australia is under attack.

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, meanwhile, cut short a trip to Brunei and immediately toured the scene. "I ask all Indonesians to stay united in fighting terrorism... Everybody should remain calm but on alert," she said after visiting victims at the MMC hospital nearby the bomb site. She said it would be difficult for the police to foil such an attack without the people's help.

Following the attack, the Australian embassy said it was allowing its staff to return to Australia for security reason. "We are now allowing voluntary deportation to our embassy's staff. They and their family may choose to return to Australia after the blast," an embassy official said.



Jemaah Islamiyah operation. The outfit has also been blamed for the 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people, including 88 Australians. "The modus operandi is very similar to other attacks, including the Bali bombings." He said the bombing was likely the work of Azahari Husin, a British-trained Malaysian engineer who has eluded

Australia more vulnerable to terror attacks.

Mr Howard acknowledged that this latest attack may create panic among Australians and said the government had no specific warning about the attack. He, however, added: "This is not a nation that is going to be intimidated by acts of terrorism."

Analysts were divided on

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