

US VP Mike Pence praises Indonesia's democratic, tolerant values

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Jakarta: Vice President Mike Pence praised Indonesia's democracy and moderate form of Islam after meeting Thursday with the president of the world's most populous Muslim nation.

Mike Pence with Indonesian President Joko Widodo

The comments, though routine, had significance for Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, who a day earlier suffered a serious political setback when a political ally was defeated by Islamic conservatives in the election for Jakarta governor. The divisive campaign undermined the image of Indonesia abroad as a generally tolerant Muslim nation.

Indonesia is the latest stop on an Asian tour by Pence that is reinforcing traditional U.S. alliances at a time when Donald Trump's presidency has raised questions about the strength of the U.S. commitment to the region.

Pence said at a joint news conference with Jokowi that the U.S. wants to strengthen its strategic partnership with Indonesia. In brief comments, Jokowi said they agreed to boost cooperation.

The vice president praised Indonesia for the moderate form of Islam it practices and said the two countries would continue to cooperate on combating terrorism.

"As the second- and third-largest democracies in the world, our two countries share many common values including freedom, the rule of law, human rights and religious diversity," Pence said. "The United States is proud to partner with Indonesia. It promotes and protects these values."

But Pence foreshadowed some reworking of commercial and economic ties, saying that the U.S. seeks a free and fair relationship that helps job creation and economic growth for both sides. He said that U.S. exporters should face a level playing field and the relationship should be "win-win."

Indonesia is on Trump's trade hit list of nations that he considers the U.S. is losing out to in trade, and U.S. company Freeport-McMoran Inc., which operates the world's largest copper mine in the Indonesian province of Papua, is in a protracted dispute with the Indonesian government.

Pence's first engagement was morning tea with Jokowi at the presidential palace. Later Thursday, Pence was to visit Istiqlal Mosque, the largest mosque in Southeast Asia.

Trump's company, the Trump Organization, is active in Indonesia with plans to manage luxury resorts being built near the capital Jakarta and on the tourist island of Bali.

Trump's Indonesian business partner, billionaire Hary Tanoë, is an aspiring politician who has said he might run for president in 2019.

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