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# Social Construction of Destabilization in Indonesia and Colombia: Recipe for Intelligence and Policy Failures

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**Abstract.** This article describes how social constructs can deleteriously affect the implementation of intelligence and policy programs in environments of political destabilization.

The New York Times--citing Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights--has reported that close to 1200 people died in Jakarta during rioting that occurred from May 12-15, 1998. The Times also reported that blame for the violence was attributed to unidentified, organized groups and that theories about these groups include attributions about thugs, representatives of radical organizations, and provocateurs from some branch of the Government's security forces.

Thugs, radicals, and security provocateurs are but three of many social constructs that can be ascribed to the self and to others. Each has varying combinations of denotations and connotations. Each may be ascribed with varying degrees of compliance to prescribed denotations and connotations. And the identification of any as a causal factor in violence may drive decisions about intelligence analysis and operations, as well as policy development and implementation.

The import of social constructs also can be illustrated by recent events in Colombia. Various acts of violence can be ascribed to the police, the military, the paramilitary, leftists insurgents, drug traffickers, and so on. Again, identification of any as a causal factor in violence may generate intelligence and policy consequences--here in attempts to stabilize the Government.

Unfortunately, there are at least several problems in creating and choosing social constructs. (1) The meaning of social constructs are just that--socially constructed and ever-changing. This construction includes the something to be defined and the expression through which it is defined. For example, as with drug trafficking, one attempts to push in at one point and succeeds at inducing a push-out at another point. Unlike trafficking, but still relevant to social construction, the very target may change or disappear as one begins to attempt to push in. (2) There often is significant intra- and inter-observer heterogeneity concerning social constructs. In essence, each observer deals with the ever-changing nature of social constructs in different ways. And so the canard that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter--even if someone may be both, one, or neither. (3) Characteristics of various political actors may be subsumed by more than one construct. One can be a thug and a provocateur, or a drug trafficker and military officer and leftist insurgent. (4) Social constructs create subjugating discourses that constrain more valuable perceptual possibilities. One or more constructs--once in common parlance and constituting dialogue--impede the search for other possibilities even in the face of disconfirming information. As a result, there may not be anyone--or hardly anyone--who fits a construct without rigorous perceptual and interpretive effort. (5) Social constructs may be facilely applied to individuals and groups, but the latter do not fit the narrative. There may be thugs without thugs engaging in rioting. There may be paramilitary personnel without such personnel engaging in human rights violence.

Certainly, Indonesia and Colombia are not the only salient cases. During the time of the Reagan administration, United States (U.S.) security authorities were planning to influence Iran's putative

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"moderates." Instead, the social construct of "moderate" was successfully deconstructed by Iranian authorities along with U.S. foreign policy towards the Mideast. (See Flaskas, C. (1995). Postmodernism, constructionism, and the idea of reality. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 16, 143-146; Greer, S. (1997). Nietzsche and social construction: Directions for a postmodern historiography. *Theory and Psychology*, 7, 83-100; Mydans, S. (June 4, 1998). Students demand Habibie's resignation. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Sargent, R-M. (1997). *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 10, 75-96; Schemo, D.J., & Golden, T. (June 2, 1998). Bogota aid: To fight drugs or rebels? *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Wagner, W. (1996). Queries about social representation and construction. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 26, 95-120.) (Keywords: Colombia, Indonesia, Social Constructs, Violence.)