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Jokowi's Food Sovereignty Narrative: Military in the Rice Land?

By Jonatan A. Lassa and Adhi Priamarizki

Synopsis

The Jokowi cabinet is planning to involve the country's military in agriculture and food security affairs in order to achieve food sovereignty and 100 percent rice self-sufficiency. What would be the implications for the country's long term food security?

Commentary

THE INDONESIAN government is moving quickly to create a big impact in the agricultural and food sectors. Framed within a strong food sovereignty narrative, President JokoWidodo is now imposing two big agendas for the rice sector's development. The first is to boost rice production to achieve 100 per cent self-sufficiency. The second is to graduate from 100 per cent rice self-sufficiency to be a rice exporting nation in the near future.

To achieve these targets, the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) recently planned to re-utilise the military's (TNI) civic mission (*TNI Manunggal Masuk Desa*) through the Village Supervisory Non-Commissioned Officers (*Babinsa*) as quasi-agricultural extension officers. Amran Sulaiman, the minister argued that "50,000 Babinsa across the country would be a big help to cover the deficit of 20,000 agricultural extension officers (AEOs)". In the past, this was largely inspired by security concerns (such as controlling communism and farmers' movement).

Military in food production: Fruitful engagement?

Jokowi's food sovereignty concept has its origin in the global farmers' movement which allowed farmers to have greater autonomy and control over their own affairs based on their own decisions. In fact, food sovereignty is a rather 'leftist paradigm'. The military's recent interest in backing up Jokowi's agenda could be justified by their interest in controlling the implication of food sovereignty on the farmers' movement.

One can therefore question why and how the government's involvement of the military in boosting agricultural production as a temporary solution to quicken the achievement of rice production targets amid the lack of AEOs. Some concerns remain as this policy may have long term implications. Firstly, one may question the urgency, effectiveness and value added of the military involvement in entering the rice field.

Secondly, the military presence may affect civil society's role in agriculture because their involvement

may discourage the genuine participation of farmers. Even though agriculture work can be classified under military operations other than war, the government should be able to explain the urgency of the military's involvement in the food sector. This can be counter-productive for food production. A decline in public trust in Jokowi's administration can dramatically accelerate.

Long road to rice self-sufficiency?

Food self-sufficiency has been a sacred goal that often received high political endorsement. Despite scepticism and criticism from the national and international experts and economists concerning the lack of rigour in its rice self-sufficiency (RSS) policy, many governments view RSS as the most politically correct goal.

Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia have been able to achieve full rice self-sufficiency. These countries have maintained rice productivity above 250 to 350 kg/person/year over the last ten years. In the case of Vietnam, apart from having less mouth to feed, the secret behind the self-sufficiency is its adoption of better technology and incentives for the farmers to grow rice.

Indonesia has currently achieved 180 kg/person/year and faced serious difficulties to achieve rice productivity beyond 250 kg/person/year. Technically speaking, achieving the RSS ratio is simple. Once the country produces enough rice for everyone (presumably above 144 kg/person/year) and having enough buffer stock in local markets and government warehouses, 100 per cent RSS can in theory be achieved, as we have seen in 1984/85 and 1992/93. In fact, apart from the decline in RSS to 93.8 per cent in 2011, overall, Indonesia has been successfully maintaining a self-sufficiency rate above 96 per cent level since 2004.

What is the right question?

The ministry of agriculture can also consider maximising the pioneering farmers (*Petani Pelopor*) that have long been fostered by former governments to play greater roles amid the short supply of AEOs. There are more than a million *Petani Pelopor* who have been successful farmers as they have been equipped with adequate level of practical knowledge and experience that can be capitalised.

Indonesia has the potential to achieve a rice yield above 6.5 tonnes per hectare and potentially can be above 7 or 8 tonnes per ha. However, it will have to deal with the continued decline in agricultural land and lack of consistency in providing incentives for farmers. Besides, the demographic pressure faced by Indonesia will not be easily resolved.

By the time Jokowi steps down from office in 2019, there will be about 15 million new babies born. Should he win a second term and steps down from office in 2024, about 31 million people - a population equivalent to Malaysia (or Cambodia, Lao PDR and Timor Leste combined) today - will be born.

The real agriculture and food production problems in Indonesia is a complex mixture of technology, incentives, demographic change, climate change and agrarian issues which may not be solved solely by military engagement because some of these problems lie in many domains - from the legal system and corrupt bureaucracy (issue of governance) to proper institutional mechanism. Still farmers outside Java continue to experience delays in the distribution of seeds and fertilisers today.

One deeper problem with Jokowi's policy of food sovereignty is probably not about involving the military. The core problem is that the present government does not have the capacity to ask the right questions in the food and agricultural sector. If the military is the answer or solution to Indonesia's future food security, the big question is: what then is the real problem?

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