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Jokowi and Najib: Can They Bring Indonesia and Malaysia Closer?

By Emirza Adi Syailendra, Oh Ei Sun and Santi H. Paramitha

Synopsis

Despite cordial relations between Indonesia and Malaysia, unresolved border issues and the plight of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia continue to complicate ties between the two close neighbours. Can personal relations between President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Prime Minister Najib Razak bring the two countries even closer?

Commentary

CONTRADICTIONARY ATTITUDES that were at times cooperative and at times cavalier dominate Indonesia- Malaysia relations in recent years. After Joko Widodo (Jokowi) assumed office, however, Jakarta displayed an urgency in building closer relations with Kuala Lumpur. Jokowi had already visited Malaysia four times this year: an inaugural state visit in February, two ASEAN Summits in April and November, as well as the wedding of Najib's daughter in May. In October, Najib also made a two-day working visit to Indonesia. Other than increasing cooperation so as to prevent a relapse of the haze epidemic last year, the two leaders sought to bring bilateral economic cooperation to new heights.

One of the most prolific projects between the two close neighbours currently is the establishment of the Council of Palm Oil Producers. Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur both understand that their total global contribution as palm-oil producing countries had reached a significant 85 percent. Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur signed an agreement on 21 November 2015 to establish the Council of Palm Oil Producers. Membership within this council has since expanded to other palm-oil producing countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, the Philippines and Thailand. Although the scheme is still work-in-progress, Indonesia and Malaysia have already declared the

principles that encapsulate the Framework of Principles for Sustainable Palm Oil, called e+POP. It is set to formulate a common eco-friendly standard in order to comply with global benchmarks for the palm oil industry. Nonetheless, doubts have arisen as to whether the economy-driven cooperation is sustainable amidst occasional tensions between the two countries.

Troubled Borders

After the International Court of Justice (ICJ) awarded the Sipadan and Ligitan islands to Malaysia in 2002, Indonesia has taken a more cautious approach towards its borders. Reflecting the nationalistic mood, Jokowi has sought to increase Indonesia's military presence along the border with Malaysia. Indonesia currently views its northern Kalimantan border as the most important source of threat and conflict. Some border disputes remain unresolved, including the one over the Ambalat area in East Kalimantan.

Indonesia is also concerned about the overlapping identities amongst its inhabitants along the common border. Following the creation of Indonesia and Malaysia, displaced identities had increasingly become a contentious issue amongst traditional communities residing near the borders. These communities are highly mobile. For example, the Iban and Kenyah ethnic tribes residing in the mountainous regions of Kalimantan often cross into Malaysia to sell their commodities or labour in the forestry industry in Sarawak. With better economic opportunities in Sarawak, there is a concern that the national identity of these people will be compromised.

Responding to the abovementioned issues, Indonesia increased its military presence at the borders. On 27 April 2015, the Ministry of Development and Public Housing as well as the military embarked on a project to build infrastructure along the border area with Sarawak. In addition, the Indonesian military is also spearheading the development of a 1,580 kilometre road in the west, east, and north of Kalimantan between 2015 and 2019. This project is accompanied by increased civic education to promote nationalism within the border communities as well as improving local economic opportunity – part of Indonesia's bid to encourage its people to earn a living within its territory.

Lingering Frictions

Some lingering negative mutual perceptions between Malaysians and Indonesians, partly a consequence of a freer but more prickly Indonesian media, have also become important challenges confronting bilateral relations. The issue of pride, especially in relation to the treatment of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia, contribute to the deterioration of Indonesians' opinions. Its after-effects can be felt. In February 2015, the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur issued a protest to the Malaysian Government over an advertisement for a vacuum cleaner (Robovac) that allegedly contained derogatory references to Indonesian domestic workers. Although this was clearly a private sector matter for which the Malaysian government could not be held responsible, the embassy protest reflected the growing Indonesian sensitivity.

People-to-people frictions between Malaysians and Indonesians have also been on

the rise. This will become an increasingly 'hot-button' issue for Indonesia as Malaysia is one of the top destinations for Indonesian workers working abroad. From January to September 2015 alone, the number of Indonesian workers sent to Malaysia has reached a whopping 75,000 people, adding to the already huge numbers of Indonesian workers in Malaysia.

Thus far, Jokowi has framed the issues surrounding the plight of Indonesian migrant workers as a matter of dignity instead of the protection of workers' rights. He intends to gradually decrease the number of Indonesian workers in the informal sector sent abroad in the next three to four years. To compensate for this, Jokowi has promised to create a multi-sector employment field, facilitating the workers to earn a living within Indonesia for which the Ministry of Manpower of Indonesia has developed a roadmap.

Windows of Opportunity

Indonesia recently had struggled to extinguish forest fires emanating from Sumatra and Kalimantan. Malaysia reportedly chipped in with more than US\$400 million and deployed three aircraft to assist in combating the haze. Despite the seemingly cautious attitude of the Indonesian government towards accepting foreign aid in curbing forest fires, the proactive stance that Najib had shown towards Jokowi did contribute to the betterment of Indonesia-Malaysia relations.

The personal affinity between Jokowi and Najib has indeed provided windows of opportunity for the two countries to contain their occasional frictions and deepen their relations. However, the sustainability of close ties needs to be supported by ameliorating the negative perceptions between citizens of the two close neighbours. So far, the elites of the two countries have taken their cultural and linguistic affinity as a unifying factor for granted, while allowing grievances amongst the people to fester. This needs to be changed.

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