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Bombs After the Presidential Election: SLOWING INDONESIA'S RISE?

Yang Razali Kassim

20 July 2009

Twin terrorist bomb attacks on two hotels in Jakarta in the morning of 17 July ushered in Yudhoyono's second term as president. Will this development shake his confidence or strengthen his resolve to lead Indonesia back to its role as a key player in the region?

EARLY IN HIS second-term as president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was rocked by bomb blasts in two neighbouring hotels in Jakarta that were attributed to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Coming so soon after his stunning victory in the presidential election, President Yudhoyono was quick to speak aloud about the political fallout of this latest terrorist attacks. Linking the attacks to the outcome of the presidential election too soon has proven to be controversial. What Yudhoyono should do is to assert his leadership than be drawn into a blame-game over the latest attacks. In a moment like this, strength of resolve and character is what is most expected of leaders.

In his final presidential election campaign earlier in July, President Yudhoyono gave a glimpse of the Indonesia that he would lead should he be re-elected: more growth, more reforms and more jobs -- plus a stronger push against corruption. The part that many seemed to have missed is this -- his promise of a more assertive Indonesia, an "Indonesia rising". Now that he has been returned to power, will we see a more confident Indonesia resuming its leadership role in the region? And what sort of Indonesia will that be?

A Stronger Yudhoyono

The bomb attacks should strengthen Yudhoyono's hand. A public angered by the new bomb attacks could push the country to rally around him. In other words, he can afford to push through his electoral promises and crack down on domestic militancy -- without having to worry about the backlash. This also being his final term in office, he can afford to be tough as he has nothing to lose.

So his first 100 days in the new term will be watched closely: will he truly be stronger? Can he overcome the image of indecisiveness that marked his first term? Indonesia's neighbours have good reasons to hope for a more sure-footed Yudhoyono. A stronger president will mean a more confident Indonesia. So long as it does not throw its weight around, a confident Indonesia that stays on top of the domestic terrorist challenge will be good for ASEAN. And here's why:

Indonesia post-1998

For all his warts, Suharto in his time provided the stability that Indonesia needed for its investment-driven economic progress. Indonesia's political and economic stability in turn provided the shade and the strong roots for the region to weather the occasional storm to also progress and develop.

Look at the region in the decade post-1998: torn by strife and turmoil, Indonesia turned inwards and bilateral tensions between ASEAN members, kept under control for years, boiled to the surface. Indonesia quarreled with Singapore over investments and aid. Singapore quarreled with Malaysia over water and railway links. Thailand quarreled with Singapore over investment-related issues. Indonesia even quarreled with Malaysia over territorial claims, illegal workers and even maids -- something never heard of in the 1970s and 1980s. It was as an image of ASEAN in total disarray.

The erosion of regional cohesion also ate into ASEAN's attractiveness to foreign investors. It did not help that at the same time, China and India were emerging as the new economic powers of the 21st century. Till this day, ASEAN's cohesion has yet to completely recover. The regional fight against terrorism, while having improved tremendously, has still more room for closer cooperation. ASEAN needs to rally again around a common anchor. But who would that be?

Will Jakarta Lead?

With his re-election, Yudhoyono is now one of the region's more senior leaders. Thailand has a new prime minister who is barely a year in office. Malaysia's prime minister is even newly-minted -- he has been but a hundred days in office. Amongst the first-tier ASEAN countries, the only leaders who have been longer in power is Brunei's sultan and prime minister Hassanal Bolkiah, Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong and the Philippines' president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

In other words, the re-election of Yudhoyono has propelled him to the forefront of ASEAN. He is well-placed to take this opportunity to rally his counterparts and rebuild the collegial spirit amongst ASEAN leaders to ensure a stable and secure region.

The question is whether Indonesia under Yudhoyono is prepared to lead. Or would it rather go alone? There are voices in Jakarta exhorting a more independent Indonesia -- independent of ASEAN, that is. One such voice is Rizal Sukma of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, who has called for a "post-ASEAN foreign policy" -- whatever that may be. Is the CSIS calling for an Indonesian foreign policy free of ASEAN? Or will this mean -- if taken to its logical conclusion-- a readiness to even break away should ASEAN be too much of an obstacle to the new-found ambitions of a democratic Indonesia?

Such voices manifest the rumblings of an Indonesia that does not want to be held back in its aspirations as a potential regional power. Signs of Jakarta's edginess for leeway are seen in its new diplomatic initiatives as cited in the Jakarta Post by Rizal Sukma -- the Bali Democracy Forum and other "strategic partnerships with global and regional powers". Australia's wooing of Indonesia to be part of Canberra's initiative for an Asia Pacific Community is also worrying some in ASEAN. There is concern about a possible rupture and the dilution of ASEAN's major role in East Asia and APEC should Jakarta get too distracted.

Living with Indonesia's Aspirations

Indonesia in the first Yudhoyono term has given a new twist to its *bebas dan aktif* -- free and active -- foreign policy. After years of Suharto's Javanese leadership style of *tut wuri handayani* -- or leading from behind -- Indonesia's aspiration as a rising Asian democratic power is understandable, even healthy for ASEAN.

But expect to live with some messiness in ASEAN's collective foreign policy in the meantime. Should Indonesia however move away from its consultative approach of *musyawarah dan mufakat* and assert unilateral leadership of the region, a new set of challenges could emerge. Indonesia and ASEAN after the 17 July Jakarta bomb blasts need each other even more.

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