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Author(s)	Yang Razali Kassim
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After the Presidential Election: INDONESIA RISING?

Yang Razali Kassim

16 July 2009

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is all set to lead Indonesia again as the re-elected president. Will ASEAN's largest member re-emerge as a confident regional player in the next five years, and if so, what kind of Indonesia will that be?

IN HIS final televised presidential debate earlier in July, President Susilo Bambang 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. Nothing new in that. The part that many seemed to have missed is this – his promise of a more assertive Indonesia, an “Indonesia rising”. So, 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

A re-elected Yudhoyono will be more assertive. He now stands on a more solid power base, has few worries about sharing power with others and can depend on a supportive parliament. In other words, he can afford to push through his promised reforms to revive the country -- without having to worry too much about a backlash. This also being his final term in office, he can afford to be tough as well. After all, he has nothing to lose.

So his first 100 days in the new term will be watched closely for signs of his resolve: will he truly be stronger? Can he overcome the image of indecisiveness that marked his first term? Indonesia's neighbours will follow this with keen interest. They have good reasons to hope for a more sure-footed Yudhoyono over the next five years. A stronger president will mean a more confident Indonesia. So long as it does not throw its weight around, a confident Indonesia will be good for ASEAN. And here's why:

Indonesia post-1998

For all his warts and blemishes, Suharto in his time provided the stability that Indonesia needed for its

investment-driven economic progress. Indonesia's political and economic stability had a banyan tree effect on the wider Southeast Asian region: it provided the rest of the region the shade and the strong roots against the occasional storm to also progress and develop. It may now sound like a cliché, but ASEAN's rapid progress in the 1990s was no doubt tied to the stabilising effect of a strong and cohesive Indonesia.

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. Such has been the corrosive effect of disunity and dissension. ASEAN needs to rally again around a common anchor. But what, or who, would that be?

Why Yudhoyono's Indonesia

With his re-election as president, 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, and to the pivotal role that Indonesia used to play in the region. Yudhoyono, the thinking general that he is, is well-placed to take this opportunity to rally his counterparts and build up the collegial spirit of the past amongst ASEAN leaders.

Will Jakarta lead?

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 that is free of ASEAN? Or is this a reflection of the inner thoughts --- of a readiness to push for an eventual break away from ASEAN, should ASEAN be too much of an obstacle to the new-found ambitions of a democratic Indonesia?

Whatever that means, such voices manifest the frustration that some in Jakarta feel over being held back by ASEAN in its emerging role as a potential regional power. Already, signs of Indonesia's desire for leeway can be seen in its new diplomatic initiatives. Some instances are the moves 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 worrying some in ASEAN. There is concern about a possible rupture within ASEAN 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. A rising Indonesia in Yudhoyono's second term may push for more space on the international stage. After years of Suharto's Javanese idea of *tut wuri handayani* leadership -- or leading from behind -- Indonesia's aspiration as a rising Asian democratic power is understandable, and will be good for ASEAN.

The only thing is to expect to live with some messiness in ASEAN's collective foreign policy. However, if Indonesia moves away from its consultative approach of *musyawarah dan mufakat* and asserts unilateral leadership of the region, a new set of challenges could emerge for ASEAN.

Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and author of Transition Politics in Southeast Asia: Dynamics of Leadership Change and Succession in Indonesia and Malaysia. He has lived in Jakarta as a journalist.