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Indonesia's next President: Implications for conflicts in Aceh and Papua

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Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono looks on course to be declared the next President of Indonesia, the first to be directly elected since independence. While he will enjoy a strong mandate from the people, he will have to deal with a Parliament in which his Democratic Party and allies will control less than one fifth of the seats. The “thinking general” will inherit a complex set of problems ranging from decentralization and security reform to terrorism, among them the long-running separatist conflicts in Aceh and Papua. Indeed in his first remarks about his agenda on 22 Sept 04 Yudhoyono has pledged to end the Aceh conflict, stating that a solution to the problem must be comprehensive and “we should not just prioritise the military operation.” This paper analyses the implications of the Yudhoyono victory for the two security threats at either end of the Indonesian archipelago.

The Yudhoyono Factor

President-elect Yudhoyono entered politics in 2000 after nearly 27 years in the military when he was appointed the Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security under first President Abdurrahman Wahid and later Megawati. In that position he has seen through the policies and pitfalls of his predecessors in trying to resolve the Aceh and Papua conflicts. Having supported Aceh's self-determination while in opposition Wahid's proposal to conduct a referendum in Aceh in 1999 was spurned by the Indonesian Parliament. Megawati's hands-off style of management and preference to use a largely military force to crush the rebellion in both provinces has also not produced results. Yudhoyono does not carry such a political baggage and is a strong supporter of non-military options in the resolution of these separatist conflicts.

Yudhoyono's position on the conflicts in Aceh and Papua is unambiguous. His presidential campaign statements reveal that he believes in regional autonomy as the solution to the problems in Aceh and Papua. He has promised a “safer and more prosperous Aceh” through “economic reconstruction, social rehabilitation and cultural empowerment”. In the case of Papua, he has assured the implementation of the October 2001 special autonomy law for Papua and also the authorization of a draft decree to establish an all-Papuan upper house for the Papua province.

Yudhoyono has also made explicit that regional autonomy and amnesty for rebels who surrender is the farthest that Jakarta will yield when negotiating with Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) and Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM). For instance, before talks with GAM in 2003, he made clear that he wanted an undertaking from GAM that the breakup of the unitary state of Indonesia would not be discussed. In other words, Yudhoyono has been unequivocal that the territorial integrity of Indonesia is not negotiable.

The above offer of regional autonomy and amnesty must not be seen as a weakness. Having witnessed Wahid's mistakes and given his own military background, Yudhoyono understands the importance of the TNI. During his presidential campaign, Yudhoyono has mentioned that human rights cannot be a supreme goal and that a "balance is required between liberty and security, between freedom and order, between rights and responsibility". He has also not hesitated to use military force to ensure security of Aceh and Papua. In fact, Yudhoyono was instrumental in implementing martial law in Aceh last year.

A two-pronged strategy is likely in future attempts by Yudhoyono to resolve the Aceh and Papuan conflicts. Firstly, he is likely to advocate his peaceful initiatives and address the root grievances of the conflict. This will go some way in assisting the second element of the strategy – the isolation of organizations that demand a separate state (e.g. GAM and OPM) domestically.

The impending trials of GAM 'prime minister' Malik Mahmud and 'foreign minister' Zaini Abdullah in Sweden reveal an intention to isolate them internationally. It is also likely that the TNI will play an important role in the containment of violence. Moreover, Yudhoyono can also be expected to keep the door open for negotiation with the separatists as long as it is without preconditions.

Desirability vs Feasibility

While Yudhoyono's approach to the separatist conflicts in Aceh and Papua looks good on paper, they are practical impediments to their implementation. By far the biggest barrier in Yudhoyono's path is the Indonesian Parliament. Although his Democratic Party did well in its election debut, it was only ranked 5th in the April 5 Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (DPR) elections winning 7.45 percent of popular votes and 10 percent of the seats in the 550 member DPR. In short, Yudhoyono may need to negotiate with the major parties in the Indonesian Parliament to get any legislation passed.

Secondly, the military elite in Indonesia has preferred using armed force to suppress separatist conflicts. Yudhoyono may need to convince them of the importance of regional autonomy. While his background will help somewhat, he will need to use all his political capital to persuade the TNI on the significance of non-military solutions.

Thirdly, the human rights abuses by the TNI in Aceh and Papua have left deep scars in the people of both provinces. Yudhoyono faces an uphill task of healing these wounds. For a start, he could assure the public that all future abuses will be investigated and those responsible will be brought to a speedy, open and transparent trial. Any further violations by the TNI will hurt his credibility at home as well as in the eyes of the international community.

Furthermore, the decentralization project has deep implications for both Aceh and Papua. Partitioning these provinces will only lead to the further estrangement between them and Jakarta. Whether Yudhoyono plans to reverse the process of creating more provinces and districts in Aceh and Papua is not yet known. He may need to ensure that policies advocating regional autonomy are effectively implemented and in consultation with the local populace.

Lastly, it is probable that Sudi Silalahi (also a retired TNI general) will become the new Minister for Security under Yudhoyono. Having worked with Yudhoyono under the

Megawati administration, his experience will be valuable. But whether he would be able to efficiently implement Yudhoyono's policies in Aceh and Papua remains to be seen.

Conclusion

The approach of President-elect Yudhoyono offers new hope for the resolution of the conflicts in Aceh and Papua. It presents an opportunity to move beyond the status quo. But it is not going to be smooth sailing. The next few months will be crucial for Yudhoyono as the people of Aceh and Papua will be looking forward to tangible deliverables on his election promises. The future of these protracted internal conflicts is in his hands.

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