

Impact on Asean

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His second term as Indonesia's President had barely begun before Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was rocked by bomb blasts in two Jakarta hotels. Naturally, he was quick to comment on the political fallout of the attacks, which Indonesian police have attributed to Jemaah Islamiah. Linking the attacks to the outcome of the recent presidential election has however proven to be controversial. Dr Yudhoyono should assert his leadership during this crisis but not get drawn into a blame-game over the latest bombings. What is expected of leaders in such moment is resolve and strength of character.

During his campaign earlier this month, President Yudhoyono gave a glimpse of the Indonesia he wants to build should he be re-elected: more growth, more reforms and more jobs - plus a stronger push against corruption. But one aspect of his vision that many missed was this: a more assertive Indonesia - an 'Indonesia rising'. What sort of Indonesia will that be?

The bombings should strengthen Dr Yudhoyono's hand. Angered by the new bombings, the public will rally around him. That would enable him to push through with his campaign promises and crack down on domestic militancy - without worrying about the backlash. This being his final term in office, he has nothing to lose in being tough.

So Dr Yudhoyono is likely to be watched closely during the first 100 days of his second term: Will he truly be stronger? Can he overcome the image of indecisiveness that marked his first term? Indonesia's neighbours have reason to hope for a more sure-footed Dr Yudhoyono. A stronger Indonesian leader 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.

Despite all his warts, former president Suharto in his time did provide Indonesia with the stability that it needed. And Indonesia's political and economic stability in turn anchored the region as a whole and enabled Asean to progress.

After the Asian financial crisis and Suharto's fall in 1998, an Indonesia torn by strife turned inwards. Also, bilateral tensions between Asean members, kept simmering within bounds for years, boiled to the surface.

The erosion of regional cohesion affected Asean's attractiveness to foreign investors. It did not help that China and India were emerging as economic giants just then. A strong but not overweening Indonesia can again be a stabilising anchor for Asean, as it was during the Suharto years.

With his re-election, Dr Yudhoyono is now one of the region's more senior leaders. Thailand's Prime Minister has been in office for barely a year while Malaysia's Prime Minister is newly-minted. Among the first-tier Asean countries, only Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and President Gloria Arroyo of the Philippines have been in office longer than Dr Yudhoyono has. His re-election having propelled him to the forefront, he is now well-placed to rally his counterparts and rebuild Asean's collegial spirit.

The question is whether President Yudhoyono's Indonesia is prepared to lead or would it

rather go alone. There are voices in Jakarta calling for a more independent Indonesia - independent of Asean, that is.

One such voice is that of Mr Rizal Sukma of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), who has called for a 'post-Asean foreign policy'. It is not clear what precisely that means. Is the CSIS calling for an Indonesian foreign policy free of Asean? Or is it suggesting that Jakarta should be ready to break away from Asean should the grouping prove an obstacle to the new-found ambitions of a democratic Indonesia?

Whatever the meaning, such voices are expressive of an Indonesia that does not want to be held back in its aspiration as a regional power. Mr Rizal, writing in The Jakarta Post, has himself cited the Bali Democracy Forum and other 'strategic partnerships with global and regional powers' as examples of this aspiration. Australia's wooing of Indonesia to support its proposed Asia Pacific Community is also worrying some in Asean. There is concern that Asean's central role in Apec and various East Asian fora might be diluted if Jakarta accedes to these distractions.

Living with Jakarta's aspirations

Indonesia during the first term of Dr Yudhoyono's presidency gave 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 - it was understandable that Jakarta should aspire to a more active role.

This development might be healthy for Asean if it results in a more engaged Indonesia, though we might have to live with some messiness in Asean's collective foreign policy in the meantime. But should Indonesia move away from its consultative approach of *musyawarah dan mufakat* and assert unilateral leadership of the region, that would create a new set of challenges for the region.

After the July 17 Jakarta bomb blasts, Indonesia and Asean need each other even more than they did before.

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