

## HOW TO SECURE INDONESIA'S COOPERATION IN FIGHT AGAINST MILITANTS

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Amidst the moves by Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines in cracking down on militants with suspected links to international and regional networks, Indonesia remains the odd man out. The inaction and reluctance of President Megawati's administration to make any meaningful move in this direction should be seen in structural, social, and psychological terms.

### **Structural Problems: Rise of Militancy and A Weak Government**

Indonesia is now a very different country from what it was during both the Sukarno and Suharto regimes. It is now a country based on political openness, where free expression of all political ideas prevails. As such, ideas that were deemed extreme by previous regimes, including Islamic militancy, have now resurfaced. The country is also wracked by political infighting which arose out of the euphoria of democracy and the lack of experience of the various political forces, repressed under the previous regime, in managing the state. As a result, it appears that the government does not have complete control of the country.

The government is weak because, as a result of abuses of past regimes, the public is suspicious of any tough measure taken by the government. Various laws and institutions that propped up the past regime have been either dismantled or reformed. One such law is the Anti-Subversion Law, which functioned pretty much like the ISA in Malaysia and Singapore. As a result, even if the government has the willingness to combat militants, it does not have the law to back it. This makes it extremely difficult for the government to act, as it cannot arrest anyone based only on intelligence information. The security apparatus (the police and not the military, in this matter) has to acquire concrete evidence, in the forms of written or spoken evidence, before they can arrest anyone.

### **Social Changes: *Santri*-ization of the Society**

Socially, Indonesian society has been undergoing what some experts refer to as the "*santri*-ization" of the society (from the word *santri*, means pious Muslims). The general Indonesian public, especially the middle classes living in urban areas, have become more pious in their religious practices and more aware of their Islamic identity. However, this should not be taken to mean that the creation of an Islamic state in Indonesia is imminent, as *santri*-ization is a cultural rather than political phenomenon. The idea of an Islamic state remains largely unpopular among most Indonesians, including the mainstream Muslim groups.

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However, *santri*-ization also means that the public is more aware of its Islamic identity, which results in a higher degree of primordial or religious solidarity. This is accentuated by the revolution of information technology, which brings the plight and sufferings of fellow Muslims worldwide closer to home. The use of Internet, television, and other means of communication make the issue more personal. Almost on a daily basis, even before the September 11 terrorist attack, the public was being fed with a flood of audio-visual information about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

### **Psychological Effects: The Rise of Nationalism**

Indonesians are generally a proud and nationalistic people. Their nationalist passion is a result of the long, bloody, and heroic struggle for independence, when they were clearly outgunned by the Dutch and British forces who attempted to regain the colony after the Japanese surrendered but prevailed nonetheless. But at various junctures of its history, this nationalism took a confrontative and rather negative approach, especially when they felt that they were being wronged. Since the currency crisis in 1997, this trend of nationalism has been building up. Many Indonesians saw the crisis as the product of a Western conspiracy.

When the result of the 1999 UN-sponsored referendum in East Timor came out in favour of independence, there was a dispirited mass sentiment of having lost a battle with the West. This was the first loss of territory that Indonesia had ever experienced. The fact that Australia, an Asia-Pacific nation but with an European image, played a major part both during and after the referendum, only seemed to confirm the image of a Western action against Indonesia.

The combination of these factors has encouraged the rise of nationalistic sentiments, both among the people and the leader. It is in this context that we should attempt to understand the adverse reactions from Indonesia over SM Lee's remarks that the leaders of regional militant cells are still roaming freely in Indonesia. Both *santri*-ization and the rise of nationalism explain such reactions.

### **Suggestions**

#### **Short Term**

The tension between Singapore and Indonesia if left unchecked could give rise to more nationalism in Indonesia. Politicians and the media in Indonesia could use the issue as a rallying point in uniting the fractured factions. But it will have a deleterious effect not only on the bilateral relationship between the two countries, but also on peace, security, and prosperity in the region

The use of media and public statements to express concerns about Indonesia's inaction against militants is inadvisable. We should learn from the experience of Australian PM John Howard, whose use of "megaphone diplomacy" has had adverse consequences on relations between the two countries. In order to mend the relationship, diplomatic channels and closed-door meetings should be the way to convey messages and concerns.

Furthermore, it will be a plus if senior Singaporean officials could issue some statements expressing understanding of Indonesia's huge problems and appreciating the

government's efforts in addressing some of these problems. A point that can be used is the relative success of recent government-led peace initiatives in Poso and Ambon.

But at the same time, Indonesians need to be convinced that the campaign against militants is based on regional security concerns rather than some global Western objective of global domination or their national interest. On a more practical level, one should avoid any reference to Indonesia's own problems with terrorist activities. It is also wrong to persuade Indonesia to take a more active role by saying that it is for Indonesia's own good. No matter how true this assertion may be, Indonesians would view this as an intervention in their internal affairs. In their view, they alone should decide what their problems are.

A more effective approach in persuading Indonesia to play a more active role in taking action against its militants should therefore be based on regional security concerns and Indonesia's responsibility as the largest country in the region and as the largest Muslim country in the world. That way, Indonesians will see that their help and leadership are needed. Reassurance of their important position in the region and the world will restore their confidence, and will prevent them from degenerating further into destructive nationalist sentiments.

### Long Term

It is important to realize that Indonesia's political structure has fundamentally changed from what it was during Suharto's rule. It is now based on open political competition among the political streams (*aliran*). It is also important to face the fact that Islam is one of those political streams whose existence preceded the country's independence. The rise of Islamic political parties should therefore be seen not as a temporary phenomenon. Islamic parties are most likely here to stay and may well gain greater prominence in the future.

Thus, it is imperative to establish and to maintain good rapport with Islamic parties, both from the modernist parties (of *Poros Tengah*) and traditionalist party (of PKB), as well as with mainstream Muslim organizations, such as the modernist Muhammadiyah and the traditionalist Nahdatul Ulama. Good relationship must also be maintained with the nationalists (PDI-P) and the military. It is crucial to go beyond the Government-to-Government basis of relationship. Unlike in Suharto's era, political power in Indonesia now resides with these parties, rather than with the bureaucracy.

The Islamic parties in Indonesia are part of the mainstream Indonesian Muslims. They rarely espouse extremist ideals. If some of them appear to do so, the very nature of Indonesian political structure will moderate and balance them. Good contacts with these parties also have the benefit of engaging them in a discussion of regional concerns, and will help prevent them from embracing extremist ideals.

It is important to help push for the resolution of the Palestinian issue as expeditiously as possible. The Israel-Palestine conflict has been the major ammunition used by fringe groups to further their political agenda. A resolution of the conflict will prevent many moderate mainstream Muslims from sliding into the hands of militancy. To this end, both international fora and bilateral channels with the Western countries, especially with the U.S., should be used.