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IMPACT OF SEP 11 ON INDONESIA: ONE YEAR AFTER

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Among the countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has drawn the greatest international attention since the attack on the United States on September 11 and the US-led “war on terror” in Afghanistan. President Megawati’s high-profile visit to Washington shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Centre’s Twin Towers and the Pentagon to assure President Bush of Indonesia’s condemnation of terrorism raised Indonesia’s image as a responsible moderate Muslim country. However, Megawati’s gesture of support was not matched by decisiveness on the part of her security authorities to arrest radical Muslim clerics identified by US intelligence agencies as members of Al-Qaeda-linked groups.

Some Muslim parties and the media rejected suggestions by neighbouring governments in Malaysia and Singapore that the Jemaah Islamiyah cell members arrested in their countries were linked to or directed by Indonesian clerics, arguing that the Indonesian security authorities had no substantial evidence to implicate them. As Indonesia was no longer a police state, arbitrary arrests of the Muslim radicals would only backfire and lead to a prolonged political crisis. They maintained that the country was faced with more serious problems of economic decline, poverty, unemployment and security problems arising from separatist insurgencies and ethnic religious conflicts than externally linked terrorist groups.

Another factor in Indonesia’s perceived inaction in the US-led “war on terror” was the lack of capability on the part of Indonesian Military (TNI) and the Police Force (Polri) to maintain order and security due to the progressive deterioration in their training and weaponry. The United States moved to resume training assistance to the tune of US\$50 million following assurances by the TNI that it would pursue reform and its decision to withdraw from Parliament and involvement in politics. But some human rights activists have raised concerns that a better equipped TNI and the Polri will have a freer hand in dealing with separatist insurgents in Aceh and Papua.

They are also concerned at President Megawati’s perceived inclination to resort to a “security approach” à la the former New Order, in which the security authorities would be more heavy-handed in dealing with critics of the government. Islamic organisations too have voiced concern that with foreign aid forthcoming, the government will use its added muscle to crackdown on Islamic groups with the excuse that they were extremists.

Nationalism and Foreign Policy

A heightened sense of nationalism has informed Indonesian attitude towards the

international community and even relations with its ASEAN neighbours. Indonesia has become sensitive to its external environment, resulting from the IMF intrusions during its financial crisis, the UN-led international involvement in the East Timor debacle, and the accusation by regional and Western governments that Indonesia is harbouring terrorists.

The wave of anti-American demonstrations and “sweepings” by radical Islamic groups reflected this strong nationalist sentiment, whose rhetoric mirror the Sukarno era. The expulsion of Indonesian migrant workers by Malaysia (along with Filipino and other illegal immigrants) has stoked the embers of strident nationalism and strained Indonesia-Malaysia relations.

How Indonesia deals with a host of international challenges derived from ethnic and religious diversity, human rights issues and political participation would determine its worldview, i.e., its perspectives on what constitutes a stable international order, how to effect strong relations with its major economic partners, and the utility of ASEAN as one of the major building blocks of its foreign policy. But it will be hard to obtain unanimous support within Indonesia’s diverse polity for an international order predicated on US unilateralism. President Bush’s “either you are with us or with the terrorist” ultimatum has placed enormous pressure on Indonesia to maintain its unity in diversity. Politics in democratic but disorderly Indonesia and the extent to which it accommodates anti-Western forces could well drive Indonesian policy towards a direction which the US would not find comfortable.

Such a situation had been evident in the wave of anti-American anger that followed the US war in Afghanistan and could manifest itself again should the US launch its attack on Iraq as the next target in the war on terror. Indonesians wonder whether Southeast Asia will be another front in the war on terror following the deployment of US forces in the Southern Philippines for “joint training exercises” in pursuit of Islamic terrorist groups.

Regional Cooperation: Challenges and Limits

September 11 reinforced the perception that Indonesians and others in the region live in a borderless world. Cross-border crime, the haze problem, illegal migration and transnational terrorism have affected Indonesia’s relations with Malaysia and Singapore. While Indonesia is aware of the need to work with both countries to deal with threats to regional stability, it wants them to understand the limit of their influence, particularly in dealing with Indonesia’s enormous problems. There is always the danger that any perceived intervention in Indonesian affairs could backfire and stoke Indonesian nationalism to the detriment of regional cooperation.

Indonesia is in the process of evolving a democratic system where attempts to combine democracy with Islamic practice will either succeed in making it the third largest democracy in the world, or fail and it becomes a source of concern as religious extremism prevails over moderation. The war on terror will not be short in duration and is likely to test the socio-political cohesion of Indonesia. Megawati will also be faced with a dilemma – to crack down on radical Islamic groups at US behest and incur the anger of Islamic parties and voters or remain ambivalent about the presence of terrorist cells which threaten not only the security of its ASEAN neighbours but could also radicalise Indonesia’s Muslim majority. Despite its integration in the ASEAN-US anti-terrorist cooperation framework and its introduction of anti-terrorist legislation, how far Indonesia will go to meet US and regional concerns remains to be seen.

How it sets out to distinguish between domestic militants whose causes are tied to local grievances and those militant groups serving as proxies of the Al-Qaeda network will be a big test for Indonesia's security capabilities and democratic credentials. On it will also depend the future ability of Indonesia to continue its economic recovery and regain the confidence of investors from the West.

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