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Tunisia and Climate Change: What it means for Southeast Asia

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The Tunisian uprising that toppled the Ben Ali government was waiting to happen. Regime decay caused by repression, corruption and autocratic rule has been eating into the system. Was climate change the hidden trigger that brought the house down?

Commentary

DOES CLIMATE change have a hand in the Tunisian revolution? In this surprising people power revolt that exploded in the new year, the usual recipe for an uprising was at play – fundamental underlying issues like repression, autocratic rule, corruption and growing unemployment. But the trigger or the immediate cause, significantly, was fuel and food, especially rising food prices. The rising food prices that shook Tunisia – and brought down the Ben Ali government – came at time when global food prices broke record highs at the turn of the new year. Erratic global weather patterns caused by climate change have affected the supply of crops and grains.

The resulting shortage pushed up prices, hitting the unemployed worst, and unleashing the long-standing pent-up resentment that has since transformed into, and inspired popular protests beyond Tunisia – into neighbouring states such as Egypt, Yemen and Jordan. In other words, what we are witnessing now in North Africa and the Arab world is the political impact of climate change. The implications are obvious: what if the global climate gets worse, and food scarcity turns into a huge global crisis affecting human security? Will Southeast Asia be spared from such a dire scenario?

Rising Prices and the Tunisian Revolt

It all began on 17 December 2010 when an unemployed engineering graduate burned himself when his fruit and vegetables push-cart was taken away by overzealous authorities. His death shocked not only Tunisia but also the rest of the Maghreb and Arab world where self-immolation is unprecedented. Taking one's own life, just as suicide bombings, is against their religion, Islam. That it was resorted to speaks immensely of what must have been the intense frustration of the people. The act resonated immediately with the wider population, triggering a revolt against the Zine Ebidine Ben Ali government. With equally unprecedented speed, the regime fell and the leader fled into exile. The protests have since spread across North Africa.

Significantly, copycat self-immolations have also been reported in Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania and even Saudi Arabia. This new trend deserves close watch. Egypt and Syria, worried that they too might be engulfed,

immediately raised food subsidies to offset the impact of rising food prices. The current protests in Egypt are demanding lower food prices – in addition to major political and economic reforms.

The problem of volatile food prices in North Africa is reminiscent of the 2008 global food crisis that led to riots in many countries – only worse this time. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, global food prices at the start of 2011 have exceeded the 2008 levels. Three years ago, the main causes of food insecurity and volatile prices were rising fuel prices and crop failures due to climate change-induced natural disasters in food-producing countries. These same factors must have been at work again to cause the food insecurity and public restiveness now sweeping North Africa.

Implications for Southeast Asia

Food insecurity is also being felt in Southeast Asia. At around the same time that North Africa was rumbling, Indonesia announced steps to offset rising prices. Indonesians began to feel the pinch when the price of chili shockingly outstripped the price of meat. President Yudhoyono has urged Indonesians to deal with the food shortages by turning their houses into “home food gardens”. The president has identified inflation caused by escalating food prices as one of the main challenges facing the country this year. Speaking at the World Economic Forum later on 27 January 2011, Yudhoyono urged the G20 to make food security a top priority in its agenda, warning that rising food prices could lead to more social and political unrest. He warned that the next economic war could be over scarce resources if rising food prices, poverty and population growth are not effectively addressed.

Singapore too has been feeling the heat of rising food prices. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said rising food prices were due to the adverse weather conditions in China and Australia, although he assured Singaporeans that domestic prices would stabilise soon. Thailand has told producers of major food items not to raise their prices while Vietnam has tightened control of rice exports and increased food stockpile.

The “Tunisian Scenario” is not exactly unprecedented in Southeast Asia in the political sense. In 1998, the long-serving authoritarian Indonesian leader Suharto was brought down by people power. Although there were many factors that conspired against him, one of the key triggers was rising fuel prices. Earlier in 1986, the unpopular Philippine president Marcos was also toppled by a people power revolt. In the 1990s and in more recent times, public rumblings were also seen in Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia.

How Southeast Asia Should Respond

As Tunisia has shown, the Southeast Asian region, just as the rest of the world, has entered an era of vulnerability and must be prepared for the political impact of climate change.

As President Yudhoyono suggested, food insecurity and volatile prices caused by natural disasters, which in turn are the consequences of climate change, will be one of the immediate triggers of political instability in the region in years to come. In anticipation, Southeast Asian countries therefore must not fall short on good governance and good economic management. At the same time, ASEAN as a grouping must be galvanised to prepare well for future crises stemming from natural disasters and climate change.

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