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Papua Region under Jokowi: New President, New Strategies

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

President Joko Widodo has proclaimed his commitment to bolster Indonesia's regional policy in Papua (formerly known as Irian Jaya). The policy will combine the welfare approach with an intensified security apparatus in the 'black pearl'.

Commentary

PRESIDENT JOKO Widodo (Jokowi) has affirmed that special attention would be given to the Papua region comprising the two provinces of Papua and West Papua. The region has endured a low-level guerrilla insurgency from a militant Papuan independence movement since 1969. Under the nationalist doctrine of Trisakti, the new policy will focus on bolstering capacities to bring about greater security to the conflict-prone and outermost areas such as Papua.

The two provinces had significantly contributed to Jokowi's victory in the 2014 presidential election. Owing to the trust that Papuans have for him, Jokowi has scheduled three visits a year to that region. His visits are seen as symbolic to win the hearts of the Papuans. The scheduled visit on 1 May 2015 coincided with the day of Papua's integration with Indonesia; which some Papuans view derisively as annexation day. The trip was postponed reportedly due to strong resistance from one of the armed criminal groups which had threatened to spread chaos if the president proceeded with the visit to Papua.

Strategic value of Papua

Jokowi is aware that Papua is of strategic importance to Indonesia and it cannot afford to lose Papua like it did Timor-Leste in 1999. Papua is one of the richest regions in natural resources. Its forests are the largest in Indonesia accounting for more than 32 million hectares, while as much as 45 percent of national copper reserves are located in Papua. It has also huge strategic value for Indonesia's defence, being perceived as a buffer against foreign intrusion by countries such as Australia and the United States that have raised their presence in the Southwest Pacific, and potential intrusion from the north such as illegal fishing boats coming from the Philippines.

Security-wise, threats posed by armed criminals referred to by the authorities as Armed Criminal

Groups (KKB) are growing. According to data from the regional police of Papua, from 2009 to 2014, there have been 166 cases of violence involving the criminal groups. One of the common threats toward the economy are the fundraising activities by the KKB to extort special autonomy funds that are distributed to the local government, especially in the mountain areas such as Puncak Jaya, Paniai, and Ilaga.

The threat from separatists referred to as Political Criminal Groups (KKP) is equally, if not more, worrying. The authorities have forbidden the use of the separatists' insignia, but in the democratic setting of Indonesia it is increasingly difficult to curb the political movement. Press releases and religiously-related activities are the common methods of domestic activists with the main goal to converge perceptions toward independence. Such efforts have been done along with international lobbies to internationalise the conflict.

Sticks and carrots

The Jokowi administration has sought to combine two strategies: building welfare and building a military presence. In terms of improving welfare, Jokowi has plans to establish three Ocean Toll Roads in Sorong, Jayapura, and Merauke. Sorong has been selected as the first location for a deep sea port facility as the gateway to Papua and is expected to reduce the cost of developing infrastructure in the region. Jokowi's other project is to build Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Indonesia including in Papua. Two SEZs will be initiated in Merauke and Sorong, as well as the industrial region at Teluk Bintuni and a tourism region at Raja Ampat.

The economic measures will be accompanied by the expansion of the territorial military structure to the region. The Indonesian Army has confirmed that the establishment of military district command (Kodam) in Manokwari, West Papua will be accelerated in 2015. The Eastern Region Fleet command base is being shifted to Sorong. TNI has also been planning to set up a 3rd Division of the Army Strategic Command as well as the 3rd Division of Air Force Operational Command in Sorong. Although the territorial structure has been criticised as potentially bringing back New Order-style military intervention, it is expected to help maintain Indonesia's sovereignty over the restive region.

Potential fault lines

The rules of engagement are not balanced: the KKBs have the ability to sporadically attack the security apparatus whenever they want, but the security apparatus must play by democratic rules. In this asymmetric setting, the Jokowi administration is aware that winning the hearts of the locals and building domestic resilience is the most important approach. To achieve this, a new programme called serbuan teritorial or 'territorial invasion' is to be intensified. Although it sounds like a hostile measure, the core of the programme is to increase military social functions and to improve its image among locals.

Thirteen memoranda of understanding have been secured with various ministries such as for agriculture and transportation. Various community projects to empower the locals are set to be implemented, led by the Kodam in collaboration with local government, related state agencies and leaders of various ethnic groups. Some activities have been implemented such as the planting of paddy early this year.

A potential peril of the project is that it could easily turn into patronising state projects that would further aggravate the feeling of angst toward the national government. Upholding democratic principles, therefore, is very important. One of the potential fault lines that require special attention is cultural misunderstanding towards the complexities of Papuan culture. It could be manifested in the form of resistance toward transmigrants and foreign immigrants; or feuds and attacks on the local inhabitants.

Thus, exposure to Papuan culture is needed to promote better understanding and hinder ethnocentrism and stereotyping of Papuans. The Jokowi government should give them the attention they desperately need - by properly developing the region for the greater good of the Papuan people in particular, and a united Indonesian nation-state in general.

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