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Combating Haze: Holding One's Breath A Year On

By Margareth Sembiring

Synopsis

Indonesia's efforts to combat forest fires have thus far shown some signs of progress. Doubts over Indonesia's commitment and the effectiveness of its measures however seem to remain.

Commentary

IT HAS been almost a year since one of the most severe cases of transboundary haze hit the region. The haze, which was estimated to cost Indonesia about US\$16 billion, and Singapore about SG\$700 million, was the first since President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) took office in 2014.

Pressure has been high on Indonesia, and Jokowi's administration has taken measures, to resolve the issue ever since. Notwithstanding some progress, the recurrence of forest and land fires and resultant haze in the last few decades still cast doubts over Indonesia's earnestness and effectiveness in combating this pollution.

Indonesia's Multi-pronged Approach

In his speech at the Paris' COP21 summit late last year, President Jokowi pledged law enforcement, fire prevention, peatland restoration, the One Map and moratorium on new concessions as priorities. Such a multi-pronged approach attempts to tackle the root causes of the protracted problem as it simultaneously addresses the underlying issues of poor land management and weak law enforcement.

The Peatland Restoration Agency (BRG), tasked to restore about two million hectares of peatlands within five years, was established in early 2016. Restoring peatlands is expected to increase resilience against fires especially during the dry season. Concurrently, President Jokowi warned local police and military officers of dismissal in the event that forest fires were to be found uncontained in their areas, and promised promotion to those who could successfully handle the issue.

Another measure taken was to improve patrol and fire suppression response time in villages more susceptible to the blaze. Riau Province, upon detection of forest fires in some regencies in March this year, was immediately placed on emergency status to prevent the unabated spread of the fires. Halfway into the dry season this year, Indonesia recently reported that the total number of hotspots thus far has gone down by 74 percent as compared to the same period last year.

Doubts Remain

Despite the seemingly positive outcomes, doubts over Indonesia's domestic efforts continue to linger. In a media interview in June this year, Singapore's Environment and Water Resources Minister Masagos Zulkifli was quoted saying "either they have done something well, and it really has stopped, or the weather prevents it from happening," and added, "it looks like the latter will be likely".

In a response to the agreement to a roadmap to a haze-free ASEAN by 2020 at the 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution on 11 August 2016 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a member of the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) community was quoted as saying: "Indonesia, as usual is not willing to cooperate."

The perception of Indonesia not cooperating with its regional neighbours has indeed come up time and again over the years. Indonesia's sovereignty-related objections on Singapore's going after an Indonesian company director suspected of causing the 2015 haze is the most recent example.

Indonesia's reluctance to accept offers of assistance to put out forest fires, and the 12 years taken to finally ratify the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution are some other examples that have further reinforced its regional neighbours' doubts over the sincerity of Indonesia's intention to solve the intricate problem.

Balancing Act Needed?

Time is tough indeed for Indonesia to get its own domestic issues sorted while managing the expectations of its regional neighbours. Efforts to strengthen inter-agency coordination and law enforcement, for example, have proven challenging. Problems in fire-fighting management and coordination were quite evident when the Bukit Asam Military Commander at Riau Province rebuked the forestry agency for not doing enough to lead the efforts, and emphasised that the military and police personnel were supposed to be the assistant, instead of the servant, of the forestry agency.

In addition to the deep-seated coordination issue, President Jokowi's pledge to enforce the law has also proven to be an uphill battle. Recently, Riau Police issued Letters of Order to Stop Investigations (SP3) to 15 companies citing a lack of supporting evidences among others. This evoked a very strong response by Jikalahari, a prominent Indonesian CSO based in Riau, which was of the view that such a move reflected a lapse in law enforcement efforts. The issue was brought up to the Parliament and President Jokowi himself, who then instructed the newly-inaugurated Indonesian police chief to conduct a review of the SP3 of the 15 companies.

Law enforcement is probably one of the toughest issues that the current administration needs to deal with. Indonesian Minister of the Environment and Forestry Siti Nurbaya acknowledged that the measures taken are yet to be perfect, but she was optimistic that things would get better.

A few days ago, she dubbed a court ruling ordering a sago plantation company PT Nasional Sago Prima, implicated in causing forest fires and haze in 2015, to pay a record one trillion rupiah or SG\$107 million fine as "the victory for the Indonesian people". Her hailing of such a verdict implies massive challenges in upholding the law particularly in the respect of errant companies.

Ending haze is in the interest of Indonesia as much as it is for the region. Having inherited the issue from the previous administrations, realising the regional view of a haze-free ASEAN by 2020 is undoubtedly a tough test for Jokowi's administration. Myriad domestic mechanisms in need of sorting out is probably the reason behind Indonesia's wanting to solve the issues the way it deems fit. At the same time, however, there is a need to appease the concerns and doubts of its regional neighbours who have yet to see the fruits of Indonesia's labour and commitment in solving the problems after all these years.

What Can be Done Next?

While errant companies have been identified as major contributors to forest fires and haze, at the regional level there seems to be a lack of specific deliberations on the management of the private sector. Yet to be made available publicly is a copy of the Roadmap on ASEAN Cooperation towards Transboundary Haze Pollution Control with Means of Implementation. This was mentioned at the latest 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. As such, it is unclear if matters relating to the private sector have been addressed there.

In any case, if dealing with errant companies is a common variable which countries need to find solutions to, then probably it is time for ASEAN to collectively look into this sector. Perhaps, by so doing the expectations of Indonesia's regional neighbours and the solution to Indonesia's own domestic difficulties can find some common ground to work on.

The dry season is projected to last until early October. Until then, while the number of hotspots in Sumatra and Kalimantan provinces keeps on fluctuating, people in

affected Indonesian provinces as well as the regional neighbours are still holding their breath to see if thick haze would pollute the skies again.

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