

## Indonesia – The Just King

Leaders matter. In the West, governments are viewed as a “necessary evil”. In the East, governments are considered a “necessary good”. Indonesians have through the ages hoped for a “Raja Adil” or “Just King” that will “do good” for the people. Joko Widodo (Jokowi), the first Indonesian President elected outside of Jakarta’s elite circle, probably comes closest to this. In a recent visit to Jakarta, it struck me that even his fiercest critics concede that he is a “good man” out to “do good” for Indonesia and not for himself.

This is just as well for Indonesia as it faces the same resentful populism turbo-charged by social media that has upended countries elsewhere. Resentment at being left behind has been turned into rage by political opportunists for electoral gain as seen in last year’s Jakarta gubernatorial election at the expense of national unity. In Indonesia’s case the populism of the “have-nots” is dangerously mixed with religious and racial intolerance that threaten to tear the country asunder. I had written then in the wake of the rising religious tensions that this is unlikely to seriously threaten Indonesia’s unity as there are countervailing forces including nationalism, decentralization and political inclusiveness that bind the country together. (*APS Straight Talk Asia: Indonesia – Ties that Bind, 11 May 2017*) Tensions since have indeed come off the boil - but the twin challenges remain – political Islam and identity politics.

Islamisation of politics continues unabated. Indonesian Islam which has been moderate and syncretic is now evolving into a less tolerant strain. The two mainstream mass-based moderate Islamic groups – Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah – are losing influence as they are being undermined by hardline Islamists. Last year’s Jakarta election showed that in the age of social media, hardline Islamic groups can rapidly spread incendiary racially and religiously-charged hate speech as well as organise and mobilise in large numbers to threaten the authority of the state. As Endy Bayuni, the former chief editor of the Jakarta Post warned, “Islamism could just be around the corner in Indonesia.”

Identity politics – “them versus us” – is not just here to stay but has been given a steroid boost. Race and religion have been weaponised to telling effect in the Jakarta gubernatorial election. “If you are not a Muslim, you are an infidel. If you are a Muslim, then you are not Muslim enough.” Anies Baswedan who won is no hardline Islamist. I met him when he was spokesperson for Jokowi in the 2014 Presidential election. He came across as a moderate and thoughtful Islamic scholar. But last year, he had no compunction in helping to fan intolerance and openly wooing the chauvinist vote during his campaign to be Jakarta governor. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), the Christian Chinese candidate not only lost but was subsequently imprisoned for two years for blasphemy. Ahok’s ethnicity was an easy target for Islamic extremists as the fact is the majority Muslim population has long resented the disproportionate wealth of the minority Chinese. These gnawing resentments have from time to time flared up into horrific bloodletting as was the case in the anti-Chinese riots in the dying days of Suharto’s New Order regime in the late 1990s. Anti-Chinese sentiment has not gone away but simply held in abeyance post Suharto. It is now creeping back to the fore, manifesting itself in the negative public perception towards China and pointed questions on the national loyalties of Chinese Indonesians.

Yet I am hopeful. Leaders make a difference. And Jokowi is as good as it gets for Indonesia. A key reason why tensions started coming off last year was Jokowi's willingness to speak up and more importantly act against these hardline elements. In his own words, he publicly declared that there was no other way than to "clobber" or "kick" those groups that threaten the stability of Indonesia. The replacement of controversial General Gatot Nurmantyo as Indonesian armed forces (TNI) chief had also helped. Unlike Indonesian National Police (POLRI) chief General Tito Karnavian who took measured steps against the Islamic hardliners and protesters to stabilize the political climate; Nurmantyo's inflammatory comments and provocative behavior during the anti-Ahok protests fueled anxious rumours of a coup, as his loyalty to the President became increasingly suspect. I met recently Luhut Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and a key member of Jokowi's inner circle. He told me that the departure of Nurmantyo was critical as the former TNI chief was "playing politics" and because of that "things started to get tense" but since his retirement, matters have calmed down. "Once the TNI-POLRI worked together, the problem was defused and will be contained," he added. And Luhut Pandjaitan knows well security matters as he was a former four-star general in the Kopassus (Indonesian Special Forces) and Jokowi's former Coordinating Minister for Security Affairs.

That Jokowi and his inner circle are willing to make hard decisions and take politically unpopular and risky actions to safeguard the pluralist basis of the Indonesian state is what gives confidence in the country's future. Moral courage in political leadership is not a given. You need look no further than the Republicans in the US Congress today to see that this is indeed so. But yet moral courage is what makes for effective government. Up against an angry, vengeful populist tide, you need moral courage to preserve law and order in society, protect minorities and clamp down on rising intolerance. The alternative is mob rule. Crowds are often not so much wise as mad. So it is reassuring that Jokowi looks likely to be re-elected in the Presidential elections next April and to continue to "do good" for Indonesia. As Pandu Sjahrir, a young and successful tech entrepreneur, educated in the University of Chicago and Stanford University, told me, "I am very bullish on Indonesia as the President is doing the right things. No corruption with President and his family. Reform the bureaucracy. And on the big issue of religion, the big push on Islam is mainly political, he is addressing its root cause – the divide between rich and poor. That is why I support him." As always in Indonesia, hope springs eternal.

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