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David, Frederic Camroux

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Executions signal a return to Sukarno-style foreign policy in Indonesia

David Camroux

On 29 April Indonesia executed seven foreigners and one Indonesian for drug offences. The refusal of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to offer clemency despite pleas from foreign leaders has been analysed in a number of ways. Most have interpreted Jokowi's decision as that of a contested head of state in a fragile democracy heeding public opinion, which seems to overwhelmingly (86 per cent in a recent poll) support the death penalty for drug trafficking. But was his decision instead a deliberate act of public diplomacy, designed to send signals to those missing the Sukarno era?

Some background is important. Jokowi is the first Indonesian president not to be drawn from either the civil and military elite or the oligarchies that came to the fore during Suharto's New Order from 1967 to 1998. As the former mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta, Jokowi epitomises a new generation of politicians who are a product of decentralisation and have strong local roots. During the presidential election campaign, Jokowi's opponent Prabowo Subianto, a cashiered former general, attacked Jokowi as being merely 'a little boy from the kampongs', not the strong martial leader that Indonesia ostensibly needs. Jokowi's intransigence on the executions issue has been interpreted as an effort to belie this accusation. As Jokowi lacks a majority in the Indonesian parliament, he has had to govern by developing ad hoc coalitions to effectively advance his reform agenda.

Yet Jokowi's actions cannot be understood without reference to the wider context of Indonesia's foreign relations. Jokowi's foreign policy represents a return to the guided democracy period of Indonesia's founding president, Sukarno. Certainly the 'boy from the kampongs' has a very different persona from the aristocratic Sukarno, yet both their direct charismatic appeal to the masses and their political philosophies have common features. Both view the international stage as being, above all, a means of advancing their domestic agenda. Former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono issued a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. This showed he understood that demonstrating the emerging power of the

'world's largest Muslim country and third largest democracy' required being sensitive to Western norms. Jokowi, like Sukarno, would appear to have no such qualms.

Jokowi's speech on 22 April 2015 at the 60th anniversary celebrations for the Asia–Africa (Bandung) conference demonstrated this philosophical lineage with Sukarno. While there was not the same lofty anti-colonial rhetoric, the thrust of the speech was the same — that is, the need to break away from the Western economic order. Is this mere rhetoric? Jokowi politically relies on the Indonesian Democratic Party, which is chaired by Sukarno's daughter Megawati Sukarnoputri. Two weeks earlier, on 9 April, Megawati lectured Jokowi at her party's congress in Bali on the need to adhere to its economically nationalist party platform. But advancing an economically nationalist agenda has its limits: it is in contradiction with Indonesia's need for foreign investment. Given such constraints, Jokowi has needed to prove his nationalist credentials in other areas, including by resisting foreign pressure on the application of the death penalty.

On the international stage so far Jokowi, like Sukarno for most of his presidency, is essentially his own foreign minister. Compared to her predecessors, Indonesia's current foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, seems to be an intellectual lightweight. It would appear that Megawati pushed for her appointment for symbolic reasons — she is Indonesia's first female foreign minister. However, to be fair, this novice foreign minister has not yet been given an opportunity to shine on the international scene.

This is in part the case because the foreign policy priorities given to Retno Marsudi also reflect a return to the Sukarno legacy. The first of these is the protection of Indonesia's maritime sovereignty, which is frequently infringed upon by the current Australian government's 'turn the boats back' policy. This preoccupation with maritime sovereignty is linked to the Indonesian sense of homeland *tanah-air* (the land and the sea) and was articulated during the Sukarno period in the principle of*Wawasan Nusantara*. Jokowi's flamboyant Minister of Maritime and Fishery Affairs, Susi Pudjiastuti, is the most visible exponent of Indonesia's maritime security. True to Sukarno's praxis — and like the macabre executions of foreign drug traffickers — the protection of Indonesia's sovereignty has been expressed in the most dramatic way to garner media coverage: the blowing up of illegal fishing vessels.

The second foreign policy priority given to Retno Marsudi — the much-needed defence of Indonesian workers overseas — appears to have had one happy consequence for the execution case. Partly as a result of a massive social media campaign in Indonesia itself, Mary Jane Veloso, a poor, clearly manipulated Filipino maid who was due to be executed with the seven other foreigners, was granted a reprieve. It appears that Jokowi's support base felt empathy with someone who (to use Jokowi's campaign slogan) was, in a sense, 'one of them'. And as this was consistent with his Sukarnoist beliefs, political practice and domestic priorities, Indonesia's president took note.

David Camroux is Associate Professor and Senior Researcher in the Centre for International Studies at Sciences Po in Paris and co-editor of the Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs.