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Jokowi's Indonesia: Executions, Diplomacy and the Sukarnoist Turn

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What if the reprehensible execution in Indonesia of seven foreigners on 29th April was a deliberate form of public diplomacy? The refusal of President Joko Widodo to countenance the pleas of foreign leaders and offer clemency has been interpreted in a number of ways, notably as that of a contested head of state in a fragile democracy heeding the voice of public opinion which, apparently in Indonesia, overwhelmingly supports the death penalty for drug trafficking¹.

Jokowi is the first Indonesian president not to be drawn from the civil and military elite and oligarchies that came to the fore during Suharto's New Order (1967-1998). As a former mayor of Solo and later governor of Jakarta he epitomizes the new generation of politicians with strong local roots who have arisen thanks to the profound decentralisation that is a defining element in Indonesia's democratisation trajectory since *Reformasi* in 1998. Jokowi was attacked during the presidential election campaign by his opponent, Prabowo Subianto, a cashiered former general as being merely "a little boy from the kampongs", not the strong martial leader that Indonesia ostensibly needs. Thus, Jokowi's intransigence has been interpreted as an effort to belie this accusation. Moreover, as he lacks a majority in the Indonesian parliament, Jokowi has had to govern since his inauguration last October by developing ad hoc coalitions to effectively advance his reform agenda. Finally, in his elimination of petrol subsidies during a solemn television address, for example, he appealed directly to the good sense of the Indonesian public at large, over the selfish interests of pressure groups in society. As one of the cohort of fine scholars of Indonesia in Australia, Marcus Mietzner, has cogently argued Jokowi's populism is of a unique variety: reformist, technocratic and one not seeking systemic change. *

However, is it sufficient to attempt to understand Jokowi's actions only by reference to the domestic Indonesian context? Rather don't they need to be situated in the wider context of the

archipelagic nation-state’s foreign relations? These involve a ‘return to the future’ of the era of Indonesia’s founding president Sukarno, from 1949 till 1966. The Sukarno-Jokowi lineage can be seen in the underlying philosophy, practice and priorities of Indonesian foreign relations today. Certainly the “boy from the kampong” has a very different persona from the bespoke-tailored, womanising Javanese *priyayi* (aristocrat) that was Sukarno, yet both their direct charismatic appeal to the masses and their political philosophies have common features. While Sukarno, unlike Jokowi, enjoyed playing the international statesmen, ultimately for both all politics is local with action on the international stage being, above all, a means of advancing their domestic agendas. On the contrary, Suharto’s foreign policy with its focus on ASEAN can be seen as a tedious confidence-building process, while the two terms of former President Yudhoyono (SBY) were spent demonstrating that the “world’s largest Muslim country and third largest democracy” was an emerging giant on par with the other BRI(I)Cs. Nevertheless, SBY with his moratorium on the use of the death penalty showed that such a demonstration required being sensitive to the norms of the West. Jokowi, like Sukarno, would appear to have no such qualms. As for ASEAN, it is taken for granted and barely rates a mention in Jokowi’s declarations.

As an illustration, Jokowi’s speech on 22nd April 2015 at the sixtieth anniversary celebrations for the Asia-Africa (Bandung) conference demonstrated the philosophical lineage with Sukarno himself who convened the Conference in 1955. Whilst there was not the same lofty anti-colonial rhetoric juxtaposing the New Emerging Forces against the Old Established Forces, the thrust of the speech was the same, namely the need to break away from the Western economic order. Is this mere rhetoric? Jokowi politically relies on the Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle chaired by no other than Sukarno’s daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Two weeks earlier, Megawati, whose sense of dynastic entitlement knows no bounds, lectured Jokowi at her party’s congress in Bali on 9th April on the need to adhere to its economically nationalist party platform and, in private, to advance the career of her daughter, a somewhat underwhelming senior minister in his government.

Many Western observers expected Jokowi, by dint of his background as a businessman running a furniture factory dependent on the export trade, to be an economic liberal. This was certainly the impression he gave in various international fora - APEC, EAS, G20, Boa Forum - during his first seven months in office. Yet instinctively, it would seem, he is an economic nationalist in the Sukarnoist tradition. While in the immediate post-independence period economic nationalism made both political and economic sense. It was economic orthodoxy for newly independent countries like India to embark on an import substitution strategy. This is no longer the case in a globalized world, particularly in Asia, where export-orientation is seen as the key to success. Indonesia aspiring to BRIC status has become the only Southeast Asian country to be a member of the G20. Moreover, advancing an economically nationalist agenda is at least to an extent in contradiction with Indonesia’s needs for foreign investment. Given such constraints, it has been behoven on Jokowi to affirm his nationalist credentials in other areas, including by resisting foreign pressure on the application of the death penalty.

Turning to the practice, at this juncture, Jokowi like Sukarno (after his eviction of Mohammad Hatta and the extended leash given to Subandrio) is essentially his own foreign minister on the international stage. There is a clear break with a tradition begun under Suharto with globe-trotting professional diplomats such as Adam Malik and Ali Alatas articulating a vision of Indonesia’s place in the world. After *Reformasi*, Hassan Wirajudi and Marty Natalegawa continued this Kissinger style tradition of highbrow foreign ministers promoting a specifically Indonesian *Weltanschauung*. Compared to her predecessors the present foreign minister, Retno

Marsudi so far seems to be an intellectual lightweight. While it would appear that she was imposed by Megawati as, symbolically, Indonesia’s first female foreign minister, yet, to be fair, the two priorities given to her do not offer an occasion to shine on the international scene.

In these priorities we, once again, have a return to the Sukarno legacy. The first of these is the protection of Indonesia’s maritime sovereignty, one infringed upon periodically by the ‘turn the boats back’ policy of the present Australian government. This preoccupation is linked to the Indonesian sense of homeland *tanah-air* (the land and the sea) and articulated during the Sukarno period in the principle of *Wawasan Nusantara*. In one of the unheralded successes of Indonesian diplomacy this concept was translated into the principle of the Archipelagic State enshrined in Part IV of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) completed in 1982 and which came into force in 1994. However, in promoting this agenda it is Jokowi’s flamboyant Minister of Maritime and Fishery Affairs, Susi Pudjiastuti, like himself a self-made businessperson, who is the most visible exponent. Alas, true to Sukarnoist praxis, like the macabre executions of foreign drug traffickers, the protection of Indonesia’s sovereignty has been expressed in the most dramatic way conducive to media coverage: the blowing up of illegal fishing vessels. On 11th May near the Aceh coast, the Indonesian navy towed a boat containing some 400 refugees (probably Rohingyas from Myanmar) back into international waters. This was the first use of the method adopted by the Australian government to deal with illegal migrants seeking asylum.

It is worth noting that the other priority given to Retno, namely that of the much-needed defence of Indonesian workers overseas has had two weeks ago a collateral happy consequence. Partly as a result of a massive social media campaign in Indonesia itself, Mary Jane Veloso, a poor clearly manipulated Filipino maid destined for execution with the seven others was granted a reprieve. Jokowi’s support base it would appear felt empathy with, in a sense, “one of us” (his campaign slogan), and being consistent with his Sukarnoist beliefs, political practice and domestic priorities, Indonesia’s president took note. In a domestic expression of this consistency, following the execution of two Indonesian maids in Saudi Arabia, the Indonesian government announced a permanent ban on sending new domestic workers to twenty-one Middle Eastern countries.

This is an extended version of an article posted on 12th May on the East Asia Forum housed at the Australian National University.