



# 17 July 2009 Jakarta Bombing: The aftermath and longer-term implications

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**A**lthough the carnage in Indonesia was not as great or as bloody as in 2002, 2003 or 2005, the political lessons to be learned in the immediate aftermath of the July 17 2009 bombing are not to be neglected. There are also various implications of the outrage on Indonesia's self-confidence which bear reflection as the world's most populous Muslim nation and Southeast Asia's largest economy moves towards playing a regional role with global reach, which was how President Susilo Bambang Yodhoyono (SBY) had described it in a lecture at the LSE on 31 March 2009.

## Bitter after-taste of the presidential election campaign

When the bombs went off, it had been a long four years since such an outrage, a period which largely coincided with SBY's first term in office. Coming as it did nine days after his victory in the first ever democratic re-election of an Indonesian president, the bombing obviously marred a propitious event whose clear outcome was already being challenged by the defeated parties. Thus it was perhaps not too surprising that a ruthless act of terror became enmeshed in formal domestic politics. Anger at the turn of events was translated into a presidential public reaction that was seen and heard as near-accusation and attack on the Megawati-Prabowo team, which was the most adamant on challenging the outcome of the presidential election, a position restated when the official result was declared on July 24. Megawati rejected the outcome, citing various electoral irregularities. The other contestant Jusuf Kalla mildly indicated he would challenge the result in the constitutional court which was rather odd as his Golkar party had said it would support the president in parliament and government. Thus, while the country was spared a second round of the presidential election – something not desired by many businessmen and professionals given it had followed an already long parliamentary election campaign – the bitterness of the contest continued to live on with the allegation of electoral fraud which, in turn, found a reaction in SBY's immediate statement that the bombing could have been the work of his political rivals.

In the face-to-face TV debates of the campaign, there was a civility which belied the no-holds-barred contest on the ground. The more restrained SBY was at the receiving end of some vicious tactics, including the use of pictures of the president for shooting target practice. There was an inner venom obscured by the outward calm seen from afar. With

continued challenge of the outcome of the election, even after he had been so overwhelmingly re-elected, SBY went on the offensive after an event which threatened to undermine what he hoped to achieve for the future of the country even as his political rivals sought to deny him that chance.

Of course, investigations by police of his own administration have established the bombing was the work of Islamist terrorists thought to be linked to a splinter group of Jemaah Islamiah, a well-known group with previous links to al Qaeda. But, just as Megawati and, to an extent Kalla, were not giving any quarter despite the challenge the bombing posed particularly to the Indonesian economy, SBY was not letting them off the hook by associating their actions with those of the bombers. In other words, if they did not care that the bombing was designed to harm foreign investment (the bombing at the Marriott was aimed at a regular meeting of the top 50 foreign investors in the country) and domestic tourism, then they were as bad as the merchants of terror.

The upshot is it's politics as usual. SBY's re-election, with 61 per cent of the votes, has not cleared the way for him to govern with a clear mandate without challenge to his legitimacy. It is no big deal and it is not likely the challenge will be sustained, but his rivals are intent on putting a question mark against him even as he seeks to move on to address Indonesia's many problems of political stability, corruption, infrastructure-building, distribution of income and economic growth. There was no rallying around him and the government when the bombs went off, and there is not likely to be full-throated support as he tries to get at the root of the terror networks which may pit him against Muhammadiyah, the second largest Muslim group in the country.

On the contrary, he has come under attack, most notably in the English language Jakarta Post, which had supported Jusuf Kalla in the presidential campaign, for associating Prabowo – Megawati's running mate – with the bombing. Some other Indonesian commentators, however, expressed the view that on the day he made that veiled allegation, on July 17, he became the true politician which he hitherto had not been – putting his opponents on the run, having to deny any involvement with the bombing. But, if he had intended that by being put on the defensive, they would not challenge the outcome of the presidential election, SBY was to be disappointed. Not only are they carrying on with the challenge, they have counter-attacked him vigorously for daring to suggest they were involved in the bombing in any way. As in any democracy, terror bombing or not, politics will

hold sway and the process in this populous nation will be as complex and complicated as ever, despite the overwhelming vote for the president. So, if the president became truly a politician on July 17, he will have to continue to be one, with perhaps better political management at a time of national challenge by rallying support for the government against the terrorists.

### Manchester United in the Mix

The touring Manchester United football team were in Malaysia when the bombs exploded in the Marriott and the Ritz Carlton, where they were due to stay, before playing against an Indonesian All-Stars side on Monday July 20. Not surprisingly, Manchester United announced they were scrapping the Jakarta visit and staying an extra two days in Kuala Lumpur, with an additional match against a Malaysian eleven on the day they would have played in Jakarta. The Indonesian presidential spokesperson, however, issued a statement on July 18 calling on United to continue with the match in Jakarta "as a measure of solidarity". This crossed-line was quickly captured by CNN that Saturday as "Manchester United Snub Indonesia." With passions surrounding the bombing running high, they were to go up another notch in the football-crazy nation. Although the fans vented their anger at the terrorists, which was a good thing, at the governmental level there was disappointment with United.

Not being particularly well-schooled in international diplomacy – which hopefully after this incident they will be – United thought it was quite reasonable they should call off the Indonesian leg of their Asian tour after what happened in Jakarta at the hotel their players and officials were due to stay. However, just a public announcement to this effect without any show of solidarity by letting the Indonesian government know first, was not seen to be particularly good form. A belated third-party attempt on the Sunday to put right this unintended "snub", as CNN had put it, with Sir Bobby Charlton and United CEO David Gill ready to fly over to Jakarta to call on the president and to set the record straight, could not take place as the Indonesians felt "the moment had passed".

This little incident illustrates how prickly the Indonesians and their government can be and how counter-parties should be sensitive in dealing with them, what more at a time of distress like the July 17 Jakarta bombing. Just to make United feel better Malaysia, supposedly close to Indonesia, has many a time been caught in the vortex of Indonesian emotion. During the presidential election campaign, the long-simmering issue of the treatment of Indonesian maids in Malaysian households broke out again, and Indonesia temporarily suspended the flow of maids across the Java Sea and the Malacca Straits. During the campaign too, the disputed territorial sea boundary between the two countries in Ambalat became the subject of claimed violations by the Malaysian navy. As did the emotionally-charged alleged ill-treatment of an Indonesian beauty queen by her Malaysian Prince husband from whom she escaped, which was a news item taken up by the Indonesian media with gusto. Indeed Indonesian television subsequently aired old footage from the Sukarno days with the rallying cry Ganyang, or destroy,

Malaysia which the fiery first Indonesian president in the sixties called a neo-colonialist project.

Actually, although relations between Indonesia and Malaysia have a peculiar ambivalence at the popular level, as between two blood brothers which is how the two nations often describe themselves, relations at the official level are excellent. The volatility however, even if more pronounced in the relationship with Malaysia, reflects a cry for an entitlement in the region not always accorded it. As shown when there were tragic military aircraft crashes, also during the course of the long presidential campaign, there is also an internalized conflict in the Indonesian mind when events inside the country make it fall short of that perceived position of entitlement. In respect of the July 17 bombing, Indonesia will also feel aggrieved that it should be hit again by these acts of terror. It is important to give it at least moral support, as was done by ASEAN foreign ministers in the same weekend after the bombing, or as was expressed US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who was in Phuket for the ASEAN Regional Forum in the week that followed. However, in the actual cooperative effort by all countries in the region and beyond, there should be no question of Indonesian commitment and capability in the fight against terror, and there should be understanding there could be frustration in the Indonesian mind that it should happen to them, and that too most likely orchestrated by a Malaysian-born terrorist Noordin Mohammad Top who appears to have master-minded the bombing and trained the terrorists to make the bombs. Any statement, as was made by a Malaysian minister in the week following July 17 that there was actually no evidence Noordin was involved was quite unnecessary. How would he know, when he was not involved in the investigation in Indonesia, the government there could legitimately ask – and then there could be another little grudge.

### Regional Role, Global Reach?

There have been commentaries on whether the July 17 bombing would slow down Indonesia's progress towards becoming the pre-eminent Southeast Asian regional power. Actually, this is no time to ask that question, as the threat of terror is transnational and the July 17 installment is part of an extremist commitment to establish a caliphate based on shariah law extending from southern Philippines, cutting into southern Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, with the Indonesian archipelago at the core. As an American official said to me, the US administration has no doubt about official Indonesian commitment to combat extreme Islamist terror, but in a country so vast and populous there will be the pockets of sympathizers ready to be canon fodder in a larger struggle. While the intelligence services of the region no doubt cooperate and exchange information, it would be a good move if Indonesia were to take the lead in giving public and political expression once again to regional determination to root out the groups that carry out these acts of terror. The most obvious occasion would be the ASEAN summit in October.

Nevertheless, the bombing was a setback to the country when everything appeared to be going so well in terms of its political stability, economic development and regional stature. As noted, the July 8 presidential election saw the first-time democratic re-election of an Indonesian president, even if the defeated rivals are not accepting the result. President SBY's overwhelming margin of victory itself should be able to ride over the objections, although it would not be as plain sailing for him as he would have hoped given the margin of his victory. There will be the sense of a victory marred. But SBY will have to get over it and manage the politics, even if his predisposition is to get on with government.

Similarly, the economy was largely going well against the back-drop of hitherto successful neighbours struggling in the global crisis. At a growth rate of about 4 per cent this year, and with the economic resilience the country has exhibited, there is an expectation of Indonesia being one of the top ten economies in the world by 2050. Indeed, even now, it is being asked if Indonesia is not the missing "brick" in Goldman Sach's BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and China). President SBY is itching to get the economy really going as he assembles his Cabinet. Of course he does not need the July 17 bombing or the challenge to his re-election, but what he has to demonstrate is an ability to ride over these challenges while keeping Indonesia steady and stable. He has to show on his watch comments that Indonesia's progress is uncertain because of the tendency for the country to go off the rails, as has happened in the past, are without basis. He had a reasonable first five years. Not only are the next five important, but also what happens beyond 2014. A stable system of governance, policies and succession has to be established.

The trappings of regional power status are already there. What Indonesia has to do is to fit into the role, which includes not flying off the handle, and an ability to deal with crises. The Americans have clearly indicated their assessment that Indonesia, as the world's most populous Muslim nation and its third largest democracy, is a fine example of progress, stability and moderation. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Jakarta in February underlined this, and all the indications are President Barack Obama will still make an official visit to Indonesia after the Singapore APEC summit in November. The July 17 bombing has not changed this and the US president will be reliving part of his childhood in Jakarta.

America's interest in seeing an Indonesia which pulls its weight as a regional power is of course not entirely benign. There are balance of power considerations against a rising China by having a rising Indonesia, in much the same way India is being cultivated and Japan is already on side. Of course, as with India, many Indonesians will scoff at this. The tradition of having an independent foreign policy and of not being associated with one side or another, called non-alignment in the Cold War years, is well-established. Any appearance of falling into the American camp will be strongly resisted, as was shown in some of the arguments during the presidential campaign. However, just as India has interests which are not congruent with China's, so too Indonesia. The question now is how Indonesia conducts its foreign policy which, while not being always in agreement with China, is not seen to be wholly allied with the US. There

is great need for foreign investment but that is not in the future expected to overwhelmingly come from the West or the US. China is now the net exporter of capital. How much and how far can Indonesia receive all this capital from the US or China without generating resentment of the kind demonstrated against the Japanese in the 1970s? There are many balancing acts to be made which will only increase as Indonesia's power and interests expand.

It would be rather petulant and short-sighted of Indonesia, for instance, to question the worth of membership of ASEAN, at precisely the time its increasing stature came to be recognized. All the shortcomings of the regional organization – for example, its slow pace of integration, its inability to project a common position on many issues, the reluctance to take a clear stand against Myanmar and on human rights - are best addressed if Indonesia took the calculated risk of providing robust leadership on those issues. That would be a measure of regional stature, rather than going-it-alone as a first option.

There are many great issues facing the region and the world. Of course, all too evidently, international terrorism is one, but there are the other big issues of the new world economic and financial order, of climate change and the many territorial disputes still outstanding in the region, where Indonesian leadership would be an exercise in regional power. On the attainment of a new world and financial order for example, Indonesian membership of the G20 and ASEAN's attendance could be mutually reinforcing. However, what one hears from some ASEAN foreign ministries is that any engagement with the Indonesians on what positions they would be taking may be construed as "interference in their internal affairs". Indonesia should begin to gather together all the various strands of the membership and of views, and make the regional organization make decisions and not duck them.

## Conclusion

Indonesia is at a turning point which the July 17 bombing highlighted but did not cause. Its domestic politics will be as complex as ever even as the newly re-elected president and government address the many challenges that face the country which could do with less and not more politics. That, however, is the price of democracy.

The country's rise in stature as a regional power has not been blocked, but the intricacies of regional power status are becoming increasingly evident which require balanced consideration and responsible decision-making. A rush to the head of the new-found status could be damaging both to Indonesia and the region.

In president SBY Indonesia, and the region, have the best leader available to handle the domestic, regional and global challenges. He should not, however, allow his generally intelligent, rational and responsible leadership to be tipped over by challenges which seek to make him lose his balance, and by expectations which race too far ahead of Indonesia's position as a regional power.