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Indonesia Prepares for Another Round of Executions

It is a case of domestic considerations trumping international image.

By Nithin Coca
July 11, 2016

If you want to point at one incident that transformed Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo from an inspiring, hopeful candidate to the oft-criticized, ineffective head of a unruly cabinet, it happened early last year, when his administration, to the surprise of both international observers and those in Indonesia’s human rights community, who mostly supported Jokowi’s election, executed 14 people, including 12 foreign nationals, for drug crimes. It was, amazingly, the largest single-use of the death penalty since Indonesia became a democracy at the turn of the millennium.

“It was a surprise moment,” said Ricky Gunawan, a lawyer with the non-profit legal aid organization LBH Masyarakat who defends those charged with drug crimes in Indonesia. “We in the Indonesian human rights community thought he would bring positive change.” The executions were widely criticized by foreign governments and civil society groups, both internationally and within Indonesia.

Initially, the uproar seemed to give way to a surprising calm. For much of the past year there was barely any mention of executions from the central government, leading many to think that Jokowi had changed his position. Then, suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere, Jokowi

doubled-down on the war on drugs as one of the centerpieces of his administration, amazingly even calling it Indonesia's number one problem in a speech a few months ago.

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Now, using drugs as a justification, Indonesia aims to resume executions, with a yet-unnamed 16 Indonesian and foreign nationals to face a firing squad, apparently soon. This will likely lead to another international diplomatic uproar and, once again, damage both Jokowi, and Indonesia's reputation globally. But for Jokowi and those around him, the benefits outweigh the costs, at least where it matters – domestically.

Domestic Priorities

Perhaps it should not have been such a surprise that Jokowi – who, before ascending to the presidency was the governor of two Indonesian cities and had absolutely no foreign policy experience – has had a domestic focus during his presidency. This is one of the biggest shifts from his predecessor, the image-conscious, globe-trotting Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

“From 2012-2014, there were no executions,” said Gunawan. “[Yudhoyono] was a president who really cared about his international reputation and knew it would be damaged if they massively execute people.”

Jokowi, conversely, just does not care much about his international reputation. While last year's executions may have hurt the rose-tinted global image many internationally still had of him, within Indonesia, Jokowi's honeymoon was long over by January 2015. In fact, the initial round of executions were one of the first decisive actions by the new president, and were strongly supported among Indonesians. Whatever prestige he may have lost abroad was more than made up by what he gained domestically.

Popular Distraction

By saying drugs are Indonesia's top problem, Jokowi is diverting attention from the other challenges he has, thus far, failed to address. His nearly two-year long presidency has been rife with challenges, many of which are out of his control. Last year's devastating fires, the neutering of the country's corruption institution, and the slow progress on improving the country's infrastructure have all tainted his image as someone who gets things done, and left many Indonesians disillusioned.

In the face of this, drugs are an easy target – a threatening, foreign menace that is destroying the fabric of Indonesian society and can be tackled by force. The figures he states are quite astounding – 4.5 million addicts, 40-50 young people dying each day from drug use. Stats that, according to Andreas Harsono, Indonesia Researcher with Human Rights Watch (HRW), are faulty.

“The figures quoted by Jokowi and parroted by national officials and media outlets are based on studies with questionable methods and vague measures,” said Harsono. They seem to be created more to support an existing narrative, rather than present information about a problem.

Moreover, the use of the death penalty is still supported by most Indonesians. This creates a rare instance where Jokowi can show decisiveness.

“The death penalty [has] more than 80 percent support,” said Harsono, adding that the role of Islamic groups, who support its use, makes it harder for the opposition to gain momentum. This is worrisome to HRW as the focus on the death penalty and the war on drugs is taking attention away from Indonesia’s festering human rights challenges.

“The Jokowi administration...has not solved most widely-cited human rights problems in Indonesia, for example. religious freedom, discrimination against women in the name of the Sharia, and Papua’s longstanding rights abuses,” said Harsono. Here, rhetoric has failed to match reality. “For example, Jokowi asked all political prisoners to be released, but so far only six prisoners were released. There are nearly 70 others are still jailed.”

The other question is – how much of this policy can be attributed to Jokowi himself? His cabinet has been noted for its contradictory policies and lack of cohesion, something most visible in the way in which certain members, such as Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Susi Pudjiastuti, seem to act on their own, independent of Jokowi.

“A narrative that people have is that it’s really interests within the judiciary and police who want to carry out the executions,” said Tom Pepinsky an Indonesia expert at Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Program. “Jokowi does not have the political capital to stop it, or, perhaps, doesn’t think it’s such a big deal.”

According to Gunawan, the idea of executions seems to come up whenever a political leader is facing a potential scandal or political pressure.

“Executions are used as a tool to avoid certain issues,” said Gunawan, citing an example of how the Jakarta High Prosecutor’s office had the Attorney General issue news about the next round of executions – days after his office was searched the Corruption Eradication Commission.

Limited Impact

Perhaps Jokowi is right to ignore any international furor. While the rhetoric from Australia, Brazil, and other nations was fierce last year, and did hurt Jokowi’s image globally, there was little other substantive impact. Every country quickly returned to having normal relations with Jakarta, and none took any actions beyond symbolic statements, such as temporarily recalling their ambassadors. Chances are, no matter what country’s citizens end up on the list, the situation will be the same this time.

“For better or worse, executing criminals for drug crimes, is [not very] likely to shape bilateral relations with any of Indonesia’s neighbors,” said Pepinsky.

In fact, any international outrage might be counterproductive, making it only harder for Jokowi, if he wanted to, to stand up to those within his administration, or in parliament, who support this policy. But it will impact his standing among Indonesians.

“There’s a sense that Jokowi showing decisiveness and independence is great for his domestic position,” said Pepinsky. “It would be very easy for a competitor to criticize him for giving into foreign pressures.”

Thus, the best hope for a shift in policy comes domestically, from the voices of the minority of Indonesians opposed to the death penalty. They’ve had some success – it was local civil society, last year, who were key saving one woman, Filipino citizen Mary Jane Veloso, from being executed, and they are gearing up to fight again.

Also notably, popular former President BJ Habibie has come out against the death penalty and the executions. Still, it will be tough for the opposition to win. This round of executions is expected to be followed by another round, as the administration expands the war on drugs and regularizes capital punishment. It is a big change from the Indonesia of the 2000s, when executions were rare, and progress on human rights and justice was measured in strides.

Who would have thought when Jokowi was elected that we’d look back on the 2000s with such nostalgia, so soon?