



The Tsunami and Political Islam and Nationalism in Indonesia

by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

It has been two months since the tsunami disaster in Aceh that claimed more than 150,000 lives and has left another 100,000 people unaccounted for. Many observers believe that this unfortunate incident may have "opened" Aceh and perhaps even Indonesia to the West. In fact, Aceh has been intermittently "closed" to international scrutiny and an international presence for the past 30 years as Acehese secessionists battled Jakarta for an independent state.

Undoubtedly, the tsunami has psychologically opened Aceh to Western humanitarian relief, with the support of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), which instead of battling Acehese secessionists (GAM), are aiding Acehese in tsunami disaster management. These two novelties could change the political situation in Aceh considerably as Jakarta seeks to win the hearts and minds of the Acehese from the separatists and as peace talks between Jakarta and GAM enter a second round in Helsinki, Finland.

At the same time, however, the TNI has tried to restrict the movement of relief workers outside Banda Aceh and the Jakarta government has called for foreign troops to leave Aceh, which clearly dampened Western enthusiasm about Indonesia's reconciliation with the West, especially the United States and Australia. Despite this setback, the TNI is being progressively rehabilitated in the eyes of the U.S. administration, Congress, and public opinion. But the TNI may have also strengthened its political influence within Indonesia, thanks to growing concerns about Western interference and rising nationalism in Indonesia.

What is perhaps less noticeable has been the rise of political Islam since President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's inauguration, which could be linked to domestic, regional, and international events; this rise is concurrent with the stirring of Indonesian nationalism. Hence, although Aceh may have been physically opened, there are doubts that the province and Indonesia, as a whole, have been psychologically opened to the West as well.

Following the election of President Yudhoyono, two radical Muslim parties, the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and Partai Bulan Bintang (PBB), seem to have gained a political foothold in Indonesia. Both PKS and PBB supported Yudhoyono's candidacy against the established secular political parties, Golkar and PDI-P, which strongly supported incumbent Megawati Soekarnoeputri. Today, the presidents of the PKS and PBB occupy the presidency of the MPR (or Consultative Assembly) and the State Secretariat respectively. As an indication of their political strength, these two parties opposed and delayed the appointment of two liberal minded women ministers, who were deemed too close to the International Monetary Fund or too much in favor of

liberalization. Although the election of Vice President Jusuf Kalla as chairman of Golkar may have lifted some "Islamist" pressure from Yudhoyono, the PKS has distinguished itself as the best organized and most admired humanitarian relief organization in Aceh, rivaling both the TNI and Western aid agencies there.

Concerns have been expressed that the PKS and PBB could press for the introduction of Muslim *shariah* laws in Indonesia; their growing influence in the president's immediate entourage could encourage radical Muslims and their activities in *pesentrens* (or religious schools) across the archipelago. They may also embolden potential Jemaah Islamiyah radicals who support embattled cleric and leader Abu Bakar Ba-ashir in his current treason trial, as well as the Bali bombers who have been sentenced, but are appealing the trial decisions.

Political Islam in Indonesia is also fanned by developments in southern Thailand. The violence there took on a political dimension when Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra accused Thailand's Muslim neighbors of fomenting unrest in Thailand's three southern provinces. Thaksin accused Malaysia of allowing training camps for Thai Muslims in the Malaysian jungle, despite strong denials from Malaysia, and blamed Indonesian extremists for supporting the Thai insurgency. But by pointing the finger at Jakarta, he might encourage Indonesian Muslim radicals to aid their brethren in southern Thailand against Buddhist Bangkok even more, just as they morally support Filipino Muslims against Catholic Manila. Current Muslim problems in Southeast Asia could thus further radicalize Indonesian Muslims and encourage political Islam, especially after Thaksin's impressive electoral victory (with his Thai Rath Thai Party claiming 75 percent of seats in Parliament), but losing the South electorally, which voted massively for the opposition Democrats, thus dividing the country politically.

Beyond ASEAN, Indonesians have been incensed by Australian moves – real or purported – ranging from media discussions in Canberra to acquire and deploy missiles that could put Indonesia in range to the decision to create a 1,000 nautical mile-maritime surveillance zone, both of which are thought to encroach on Indonesian sovereignty. This fear is heightened thanks to Canberra's close support for and collaboration with the U.S. in its fight against international terror; Prime Minister John Howard is commonly perceived in Jakarta as President George W Bush's "deputy sheriff" in the region. Many have also never forgotten nor forgiven Australia for having helped "liberate" Timor Leste, which is viewed as a profound humiliation for Indonesia. It is thus hoped that Canberra would tread carefully in its approach to Aceh's relief operations, even though it has pledged a generous \$760 million in humanitarian relief, the majority of it going to Indonesia.

Finally, the rise of political Islam has clear links to broader Muslim issues, as moderate Indonesian Muslims have become increasingly critical of Washington's policies in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire. Yudhoyono's first overseas trip was to attend Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's funeral in Cairo, a clear indication of Indonesia's Islamic priorities and convictions. On the other hand, Jakarta's *rapprochement* with Washington is moving forward discreetly and relations with the U.S. are cool, even though the U.S. supports Yudhoyono, especially in the fight against terrorism in Southeast Asia. Yudhoyono cannot move fast, however, primarily because of the domestic Muslim lobby. Washington-Jakarta *rapprochement* could thus be held hostage to the rise of political Islam. Aceh may be a small opening that allows the TNI and the U.S. military to cooperate and work together, and perhaps even permit *rapprochement* and the resumption of U.S. military training to the TNI, but bilateral ties have not realized their full potential.

The rise of political Islam in Indonesia is a fundamental aspect of Yudhoyono's Indonesia. The tsunami relief operations may have opened Aceh, and even Indonesia, but the rise of both political Islam and Indonesian nationalism appears to have also consolidated in tandem. Australia, U.S., and other Western governments must be aware of this parallel phenomenon and should not be lulled by the illusion of a seemingly pro-West Indonesia in the making. President Yudhoyono must continue to balance between a pro-Western business outlook and Indonesia's inherent Islamic and nationalistic inclinations since its "profound humiliation" suffered during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Eric Teo Chu Cheow, a business consultant and strategist based in Singapore, is Council Secretary of the Singapore Institute for International Affairs (SIIA). He can be reached at sldeet@mbox3.singnet.com.sg