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Indonesian Nationalism: Between the Bellicose and the Inclusive

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

An Indonesian presidential candidate's call for nationalism in handling national issues should be seen in the context of internal challenges to the republic's unitary constitution from regional and religious sectors.

Commentary

During his recent public lecture in Singapore on 1 August 2012, Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto highlighted the need for his country to remain nationalist in its outlook and to adopt a nationalist stand on issues of national interest such as natural resources and food security. The former Special Forces commander and current businessman also spoke about the need for Indonesian leaders to take a pragmatic approach to the country's issues and problems.

Prabowo cautioned that whoever might take over leadership of the country will have a short time window of two decades "to get things right" and to ensure that Indonesia will not flounder in the future. He cited statistics that seemed alarming to some observers, noting that 60 per cent of the monetary wealth of Indonesia was concentrated in Jakarta while 60 per cent of the country's population remained rural and were dependent upon agriculture. He warned that in 12 years' time Indonesia's oil reserves would be used up, and in 34 years so would the country's gas reserves.

A complex nationalism

While Indonesia's presidential elections are still two years away, most of the presidential contenders have already begun their campaigns and Prabowo was the first to project himself beyond Indonesia's borders.

Lest Indonesia-watchers become alarmed by Prabowo's calls for nationalism it has to be understood that Indonesian nationalism is, and has always been, complex. With the exception of the brief confrontation with Malaysia between 1963 and 1965, Indonesia has largely avoided conflict with its regional neighbours.

Historians will note that far from being a belligerent, aggressive state, Indonesia has in fact had to grapple with several instances of internal revolt that jeopardised the country's nation building process from the beginning. In the 1950s the fledgling Indonesian republic had to contain the centrifugal tendencies of numerous rebellions across Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi.

The Indonesian army, which was put together from elements of the former Dutch colonial KNIL, Indonesian nationalist, Islamist and Communist militias, underwent a long process of internal consolidation before it became one of the more stable institutions in the country that has been crucial to the nation-building process.

Pressure from local power centres

Since the fall of President Suharto in 1998 however, the Indonesian state has been under considerable pressure from local power centres across the country that have demanded more autonomy and local power. Compounding this trend has been the rise of local governors and Bupatis, and the proliferation of local ordinances and laws (Peraturan Daerah) that have been introduced at the local level, some of which have challenged the spirit of the republican constitution of Indonesia.

In Tasik Malaya, West Java, for instance local authorities have introduced a law that makes it compulsory for all women – including non-Muslims and tourists – to cover their heads with scarves. Recently conservative Muslim scholars in Indonesia have even gone as far as stating that Indonesian Muslims must not salute the country's flag or sing the national anthem, for these were seen as 'un-Islamic' acts.

It is in the context of these mounting internal challenges against the unitary spirit of the Indonesian constitution that one can understand the appeal of nationalism for some of Indonesia's leaders such as Prabowo. Being a former military commander himself, Prabowo is more than likely to be infused with the ethos of republicanism, and may perhaps regard sectarian demands from religious or ethnic groups as potentially damaging to the country. In the first half of the 2000s Indonesia's international image was damaged somewhat by news reports of religious and ethnic conflict across the country. Indonesia surely cannot face another round of sectarian conflict today.

In the lead-up to the next elections in Indonesia, more talk of nationalism among Indonesia's presidential hopefuls can be expected. Such utterances have to be understood in their context, with some understanding of the challenges that the country faces today and some recognition of the fact that a vast country like Indonesia will need some emotive and symbolic force to keep it together.

No country in the region, however, poses an existential threat to Indonesia, and Indonesia does not pose an existential threat to its neighbours either. But as long as Indonesia's leaders do not find a means to contain the growing demands of local elites and power-centres across that vast country, Indonesia runs the risk of further centrifugal forces pulling it apart. In the face of these new ethnic and religious demands, nationalism – as long as it is inclusive and not bellicose – may well be the glue that keeps the country together.

Dr Farish A Noor, who has been researching Indonesia for over 10 years, is a Senior Fellow with the Contemporary Islam Program at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.