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The Usman-Harun Issue: Some Thoughts for Indonesia to Ponder

By Leonard C. Sebastian

Synopsis

Following the flap over Indonesia's decision to name a frigate after two marines who carried out a bomb attack in Singapore during Confrontation, Jakarta needs to make a gesture that it still values the bilateral relationship with its smaller neighbour. How can such a gesture be done so that the issue can be resolved?

Commentary

IN OCTOBER 1968, two Indonesian marines were executed for detonating a bomb in McDonald House along Orchard Road three years earlier, leading to the deaths of three people and injuring 33 others. Their appeal to the Privy Council was rejected. Before their execution, the two marines, Usman Mohammad Ali and Harun Said, had asked to see the families of the victims and sought their forgiveness.

Indonesia was in Confrontation against the formation of Malaysia of which Singapore was a part before it became an independent republic in 1965. Sukarno, who saw the incipient Federation of Malaysia as a post-colonial "stooge" of the British, embarked on *Konfrontasi* and had an arrogant attitude towards Singapore.

Sending the wrong signals

Recounting a meeting during a visit to Indonesia in 1960, former Singapore Ambassador to Indonesia Mr Lee Khoo Choy observed the behaviour of Sukarno towards a Singapore delegation led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew: "He (Sukarno) was serious and brief when speaking to Lee Kuan Yew. They spoke in Bahasa for about twenty minutes, then he got up, shook our hands and walked back to the room without observing the courtesy of sending us to the door ... My impression of Sukarno from this experience therefore was that he was arrogant, treating us as delegates from a small country paying him a tribute".

President Suharto, less flamboyant and more pragmatic in his approach to politics sought to draw a line under the Sukarno era. He wanted to stabilise the country and bolster his position in domestic politics and consequently appealed to Singapore not to hang the marines. His petition proved futile primarily because the Singapore leadership's experience with Sukarno reinforced the fact that weakness in the face of pressure from a larger state would undermine Singapore's sovereignty. Owing to Indonesia's expansionist policy during the Sukarno era, the act of sending two marines to attack targets in Singapore further reinforced the idea that Indonesia had ambitions to absorb Singapore.

The bomb attack on Orchard Road is a fact of history and the latest decision to name the Navy frigate KRI Usman Harun not only opens old wounds but once again requires Singaporeans to ascertain exactly what Indonesia's strategic intentions are. As a further affront to Singapore's sovereignty, following the return of the bodies of the two marines to Jakarta in 1968, 400 uniformed students ransacked the Singapore Embassy and ambassador's residence in the process burning the Singapore flag. Similar to a recent *Jakarta Post* editorial "Can we be more sensitive", foreign minister Adam Malik then appealed for calm stating that he wanted no reprisals against Singapore.

So how should Indonesia better understand Singapore's position on this issue of the naming of a warship after the two marines? The Singapore Government statement on 7 February stresses that "the matter had been closed in May 1973 when PM Lee Kuan Yew sprinkled flowers on the graves of the two marines". Jakarta has seemingly adopted a similar view, though with a caveat. According to presidential spokesman for international relations Teuku Faizasyah, "the decision to name the ship after Indonesian heroes is final and Indonesia considers the two countries have long resolved the matter following then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's visit to the heroes' cemetery and sprinkling of flowers on the graves of Osman and Harun".

Yet, continuing to justify the acts of Usman and Harun as heroic and insisting that the frigate be named Usman-Harun not only touches a raw nerve in Singapore but sends all the wrong signals about the value Indonesia places on the bilateral relationship.

How to resolve the issue

Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has declared that there was no ill-intent behind naming the warship after the two marines. At the heart of the matter is whether we trust each other's long-term intentions. If Indonesia claims only territories belonging to the Dutch East Indies and has no claims to Singapore or Malaysia, then why name a ship that honours Indonesia's foreign adventures?

Singapore remains consistent on such matters. When Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975, Singapore abstained in a vote at the United Nations on Indonesia's occupation. In the short-term, this act infuriated Suharto, souring bilateral ties. However, had Singapore acquiesced and publicly endorsed Indonesia's invasion, then it would have sent the wrong signals about its own security.

From time to time, when things are going well between Singapore and Indonesia, anti-Singapore elements will surface. We can only conclude that certain individuals within Indonesia's military establishment bear a grudge on a perceived humiliation in 1968 and have refused to let bygones be bygones. Such reasoning may have played its part in the decision to name a navy ship KRI Usman-Harun.

So how should the issue be resolved? With general and presidential elections forthcoming, it is important that the issue be quickly depoliticised. In an election year, it may be difficult for the Indonesian government to backtrack on its decision to name a warship after the two marines now that the issue has become public knowledge in Indonesia.

If Jakarta seeks to proceed with its decision, then it is incumbent on the Indonesian government to acknowledge the role of the Sukarno era government in perpetrating acts of sabotage in Singapore which caused the death of innocent Singaporean civilians. Such a statement would go some way to reassure the Singapore public about Indonesia's good intentions.

Would it not be a magnanimous gesture for someone senior from the Indonesian military or defence establishment, or for that matter even President Yudhoyono, to make a visit to the families of the deceased in Singapore and offer them sincere condolences replicating the act undertaken by Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 1973?

There is nothing to be gained by a prolonged bilateral squabble. Yet such an act of supreme statesmanship by Indonesia's leaders would not only gain the respect of all Singaporeans but will also reinforce the foundations of the bilateral relationship, enabling both countries to move forward and embark on greater cooperation initiatives. More importantly, such a gesture would underpin the pacific nature of Indonesia's emergence as a regional power and the recognition that comes with such status.

Associate Professor Leonard C. Sebastian is Coordinator of the Indonesia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.