

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

**Navigating Rough Water:  
Indonesia's Approach to Domestic and Regional Conflicts**

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As a country composed of thousands of islands and located at a strategic geopolitical location with several neighboring countries, Indonesia has long been facing different types of conflicts, domestically and regionally. Among the conflicts are separatist movements in Aceh and Papua with the former resolved quite successfully while the latter is still being dealt with. Other conflicts are both bilateral and multilateral conflicts surrounding the South China Sea and its proximate regions.

MacLaughlin and Perdana (2010) reported that Indonesia has come into many types of conflict. At both the national and local levels, conflicts spread from general crimes to ethnic-religious conflicts. The report also highlights two underpinning features of the conflict in Indonesia. First, ethnic and religious conflicts have developed consistently over the years, and this runs in line with the process of democratization and decentralization. To some extent, democratization and decentralization have opened new avenues for other conflicts to potentially materialize.

Second, while ethnic and religious conflicts stand out as a consistent type at both national and local levels, they are closely related with and mutually reinforce other types of conflict such as election-based and resource-related conflicts. This makes the feature of domestic conflicts in Indonesia very complex, and efforts to deal with them have become more and more burdensome.

To a much lesser extent, Indonesia is still struggling with resolving separatist conflict in the easternmost part of the archipelago: West Papua. After institutionally resolving the Aceh separatist conflict in 2005, Papua is the only remaining – though not necessarily the last – separatist conflict in the country with no less tedious complexity. Led by the Free Papua movement – or *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* or OPM – since 1974, the conflict has claimed thousands of lives, most of which are civilians. From President Abdurrahman Wahid in 1999 to current President Joko Widodo, Indonesia has tried many ways to resolve the conflict. Contrary to Aceh, the efforts have failed to tame the conflict.

This issue brief aims to take a critical look at the approach the Indonesian Government has employed to address the aforementioned conflicts. The focus of this analysis is on the reason why Indonesia took different approaches in dealing with conflicts. Domestically, Indonesia has employed a more pragmatic strategy in dealing with different conflicts, combining repressive and accommodative approaches. Meanwhile, regionally, Indonesia has consistently employed a more accommodative approach.

## Domestic Approach to Separatist Conflict: Erratic Pragmatism

In dealing with separatist conflict, Indonesia has practically combined several strategies from internal diplomacy, accommodative stance, to military repressive measures. The leading feature of these different approaches reflects the absence of a clear strategy.

In dealing with the separatist conflict of Papua, this unclarity becomes very salient and is combined with the complex nature of the Papua conflict. Some separatist elements raised challenges Jakarta on historical and ideological ground. They see Papua as a distinct race that cannot be fully integrated into Indonesia. They also based their struggle on the promise of the late Dutch colonial government in 1950 to hand over the region to Papua and helped establish an independent country. The conduct of the assumably manipulated plebiscite in 1969 and a series of human rights violations before and after that fuel the resistance even further.<sup>1</sup>

The other element of resistance is the developmentalists who feel dissatisfied with the way development has progressed in Papua. Until recently, Papua is still the least developed province in Indonesia in roughly every aspect. Some Papuans even claim that they have been marginalized and deprived of their land due to the inflow of migrants since the 1970s. Only a limited amount of Papuans have become the leaders in different levels of local government while the majority of bureaucratic and political positions are occupied by migrants.<sup>2</sup>

The last group of resistance contains a more political-economy nature, in which, resistance and conflict mostly deal with access to natural resources. This is more elitist, the settlement of which requires elite accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

Without proper diagnosis of the root of the conflict, or even simply calculated ignorance, Indonesia has launched several different strategies. From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, Indonesia has relied on military operations on a small and fragmented scale. The approach changed in the late 1990s with the coming of democratization. The former president Abdurrahman Wahid offered a more accommodative gesture. First, he allowed the flying of the Morning Star flag – Bintang Kejora – together with but slightly below the Indonesian flag. Then he offered the establishment of several new provinces and districts. In 2001, through Law 21/2001, Indonesia offers more structural concessions by the implementation of the Special Autonomy law, through which, Papua will get a more fiscal transfer, cultural recognition through political representation, and several other affirmative offers. However, after twenty years of implementation, the concessions failed to tame the separatist call.

The absence of an accommodative substance in Jakarta's policy lies at the very heart of this failure. Special Autonomy has even become the center of the problem. The policy is presumed halfhearted as the promised accommodation and affirmative action relatively failed to materialize. This started with the lack of participation of Papuans, especially the separatist groups, during the

<sup>1</sup> Kirksey, Eben. 2012. *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Architecture of Global Power*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Lele, 2021. "Asymmetric decentralization, accommodation and separatist conflict: lessons from Aceh and Papua, Indonesia," *Territory, Politics, Governance*, DOI: 10.1080/21622671.2021.1875036; Shane Joshua Barter and Isabelle Côté. 2016. "Strife of the soil? Unsettling transmigrant conflicts in Indonesia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46(1): 60-85.

<sup>3</sup> Antonius Made Tony Supriatma. 2013. "TNI/POLRI IN West Papua: How Security Reforms Work In The Conflict Region," *Indonesia*. 95 (April): 93-124.

drafting of the bill. Not only has the bill had a low sense of belonging among Papuans but it failed to address the root cause of the conflict.

As the conflict continued to escalate since 2019 by claiming civilian casualties and basic government facilities, Indonesia changed the course by declaring the separatist elements as terrorists. Limited but bold police and military operation, involving the well-trained Counter-Terrorism Force, is now underway to locate the movement. Many have questioned the viability of such a measure as it does not solve the real problem. Some even dubbed it a desperate move if not insanity.<sup>4</sup>

How Indonesia employed a very pragmatic approach in dealing with separatist conflict can be seen through the combination of repressive operations and a more accommodative structural transformation. However, the limit of participation has been contained. Indonesia's failure to present a proper response has helped Papua's separatist movement receive international attention. Unless a more genuine and systematic structural transformation to truly accommodate the voices of Papuans, the Papua conflict can be settled peacefully though not completely. Indonesia's erratic pragmatism even confirms some allegations that it has no intention to resolve the conflict though it does not expect the conflict to develop beyond its control.<sup>5</sup>

### **Regional Approach: Constructive Engagement**

At the regional level, Indonesia has also been facing a daunting challenge at both bilateral and multilateral levels. It has several territorial disputes with its neighbors, the most notable of which is the long-standing conflict with Malaysia. It started with the campaign of "*Ganyang Malaysia*" (Destroying Malaysia) in 1963 which was triggered by the establishment of the Confederation of Malaysia. As the confederation was supported by the British Government, President Soekarno saw it as a form of neo-colonialism in the region and had to, therefore, be contested. The silent confrontation sustains up to now, which involves both territorial and other disputes such as migrant and low-skilled workers. Indonesia's loss over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands dispute in 2002 has only sustained the tension.

At the multilateral level, Indonesia has also been facing the South China Sea and Spratly Islands conflict which involves several countries in the region: China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan. The overlapping claim by these countries on many opposing grounds has made this territorial dispute an intriguing political issue. Efforts to bring settlement over the case by involving the International Court have also failed to terminate the dispute. Similarly, no multilateral forum was in place yet to resolve the conflict. Critics have pointed out that the employment of the ASEAN Way in settling the conflict has been used by China to benefit its position and ASEAN might need to reconsider its approach.<sup>6</sup> The resolution of this conflict will significantly put a test on the viability of the regional stability.

In dealing with these territorial conflicts, Indonesia has employed two main strategies. It first adopted a litigation strategy by bringing the case to respective institutions as in the case of the

<sup>4</sup> <https://indonesiatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/indonesias-approach-to-papua-is-starting-to-look-like-insanity/>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Chauvel & Ikrar Nusa Bhakti. 2004. "The Papua conflict: Jakarta's perceptions and policies." *Policy Studies* (5): 1-100.

<sup>6</sup> Munmun Majumdar, 2015. "The ASEAN Way of conflict management in the South China Sea," *Strategic Analysis* (39) 1: 7-87.

Sipadan-Ligitan dispute. However, as its experiment had brought a significant cost to its territorial integrity, Indonesia has since then changed its strategy. In line with the spirit of the ASEAN way, Indonesia has since then prioritized the employment of both bilateral and multilateral dialogue, the resolution of which depends on consensus. While the employment of the strategy had brought no significant process toward resolution, the strategy has at least sustained the political stability in the region.

In a non-territorial conflict, Indonesia and other ASEAN countries have attempted to confront the domestic conflict of Myanmar regarding democratization and another humanitarian crisis of Rohingya. In its most current development of the political crisis, the Myanmar case has not only endangered regional stability but also put the very existence of ASEAN to the test. Given the escalation of the recent political violence in Myanmar, an ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was called in April 2021 and resulted in a Chairman's Statement. Acknowledging ASEAN's positive and constructive role in facilitating a peaceful solution in the interest of the people of Myanmar and their livelihoods, the meeting resulted in a five-point consensus. First, there shall be an immediate cessation of violence and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint. Second, constructive dialogue among all parties shall seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people. Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN. Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre. Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.<sup>7</sup>

Indonesia has played an important role in trying to resolve the Myanmar conflict. In March 2021, President Joko Widodo has called for a special ASEAN Summit to discuss the Myanmar situation and proposed it to Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah as the current chair. He openly expressed his concern over the deadly use of force against pro-democracy protesters and called for a stop to the violence.<sup>8</sup> He again raised this message during the Summit, stating that violence must be stopped and democracy, stability, and peace must be restored immediately.<sup>9</sup> To the surprise of many, such a message had never been delivered in such a direct and bold tone previously.

In addressing Myanmar's political situation, Indonesia – as an ASEAN member – was bound by the regional policy framework in dealing with any domestic matters: the ASEAN Way. The framework requires its members to resolve any issue by prioritizing the principles of constructive engagement, non-interference, dialogue, and consensus. It has been broadly criticized for being ineffective to resolve matters of political and economic importance. However, it is also praised for having sustained the political stability in this fast-growing region. Bridging the merit and peril of the ASEAN Way, ASEAN and Indonesia need to change their approach toward a more critical engagement.<sup>10</sup>

## Future Outlook

Considering the current dynamics and analyzing it in a much bigger framework, the way Indonesia

<sup>7</sup> <https://asean.org/storage/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2021/03/19/president-jokowi-calls-for-asean-summit-to-discuss-myanmar.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://voi.id/en/news/46744/jokowi-violence-in-myanmar-must-stop-democracy-returns>.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Jones. 2008. "ASEAN's albatross: ASEAN's Burma policy, from constructive engagement to critical disengagement," *Asian Security* (4) 3: 271-293.

deals with conflict would lie highly on its ability to balance domestic interest and interest reputation. As far as domestic conflict is concerned, a more accommodative approach is called, and this applies to the way Indonesia deals with the Papua conflict. Indonesia has successfully resolved the long-standing Aceh conflict and channeled it into a democratic structural transformation. The same principle should be applied to Papua, the essence of which lies in its willingness to accommodate Papuan voices through a more inclusive process and accommodative policies.

At the regional level, for both bilateral and multilateral territorial disputes as well as supposedly domestic conflict in other ASEAN member countries, Indonesia is bound by the structural framework of the ASEAN Way. Yet, there is room for a transformation to such approach by applying a more critical engagement. This is not up to Indonesia alone but is also subject to other members' preferences. However, as the biggest country in this association, Indonesia may start such a transformation. ■

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