The ‘Yudhoyono paradox’; The sense of being insecure even though one is at the apex of power
Evan A Laksmana
TODAY
790 words
30 January 2010
TODAY (Singapore)
TDAYSG
AM
42
English
(c) 2010. MediaCorp Press Ltd.

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was inaugurated for a second term three months ago, public expectations of the former military general went through the roof.

Not only did Indonesia survive the global economic crisis relatively unscathed, his Democrat Party had also tripled its votes and got Mr Yudhoyono re-elected with the largest mandate in history. And along with his coalition partners, his party also dominated the House of Representatives.

Yet, as Mr Yudhoyono marked his 100 days this week, not only is the gap between policy promises and deliverables appearing to grow wider — public unhappiness towards his government is also manifesting itself in the form of one demonstration after another.

In fact, any policy initiatives or achievements on the part of his government appear to have been overshadowed by the current political melee.

Pundits claim that all these could have been avoided had Mr Yudhoyono taken a more decisive role in controversies such as the saga involving the police and the Corruption Eradication Commission, as well as the Bank Century parliamentary inquiry.

This is, after all, his last term in office and he had just been given an overwhelming mandate.

But instead, the President hesitated and kept conveying the image of a leader who was “targeted and victimised” by rogue political forces. He also had a tendency of making public statements at the 11th hour — though he seemed to have the time to launch his third music album.

As a result, his popularity began to fall. Recent polls show that his approval ratings have dropped to around 60 to 70 per cent — from over 90 per cent three months ago.

I attribute the slide to what I call the “Yudhoyono paradox” or what others see as the President’s “inferiority syndrome” — the sense of insecurity while being at the apex of power.

Of course, there are no easy answers as to why this paradox persists. Perhaps, one can start by examining Mr Yudhoyono’s lack of a solid power base within Indonesia’s military and political circles.

Throughout his military career, he was seen more of a “bookish” general than a “soldier’s soldier”.

Indeed, he was the leading “intellectual reformist” of the armed forces in the ’90s.

He had also spent some time in international and educational postings overseas.

As in most militaries, however, such track record may not necessarily earn him the respect of the boys in green
who often prefer a soldier who has earned his spurs in battle. This may partly explain why the key posts in the military are held by Mr Yudhoyono’s closest military classmates.

In politics, meanwhile, let’s not forget that Mr Yudhoyono officially became a politician only six years ago, and had relied on a loose “coalition of the willing” when running for President in 2004.

This suggests that there wasn’t ample time for Mr Yudhoyono to establish himself in public politics and develop a solid and loyal political base before becoming President.

Also, though he previously held Cabinet posts and was the military’s chief of socio-political affairs, playing politics behind the scenes and in public are two different things.

As such, it is not surprising that Mr Yudhoyono needs to use both the stick and carrot on his friends and foes to ensure his grip.

But when you are at the pinnacle of power, portraying yourself as a “victim” will only fire up your opponents and disappoint your friends. This is what has been taking place in the past three months.

What really concerns most Indonesians, however, is Mr Yudhoyono’s stonewalling in the face of criticisms and his seemingly “authoritarian” tendencies.

The fact that the President could seemingly disregard mounting public pressure and criticisms — which have hurt the economy to some extent — while proclaiming his “100-days programme” a success underlines this concern.

The administration’s recent backing for a proposed regulation on wiretapping and the bills on state secrecy and state intelligence has done the President no favours — with experts arguing that they could be used to muffle the press.

To top it all, the President stated after a meeting with the heads of seven state institutions, including the judiciary, last week that “there is no such thing as a motion of no confidence in a presidential system” — a claim which is legally disputable at best.

A Spanish philosopher once said: “The risk of a wrong decision is preferable than the terror of indecision.”

The President would do well to remember this. € voices@mediacorp.com.sg

The writer is a researcher with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta.

MediaCorp Press Ltd
Document TDAYSG0020100129e61u0001g

© 2018 Factiva, Inc. All rights reserved.