Shoot on Sight: The Politics of Indonesia’s Escalating Anti-Drug Campaign

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IN RECENT MONTHS, INDONESIAN PRESIDENT JOKO WIDODO HAS CALLED FOR AN ESCALATION IN ANTI-DRUG OPERATIONS, instructing police officials to shoot on sight suspected drug traffickers. Although President Widodo—popularly known as Jokowi—has long held a hardline stance against narcotics, his latest statements demonstrate a significant escalation in rhetoric, and the desire to flirt with increasingly authoritarian tactics in combating drugs. This change must be understood in the context of Indonesian domestic politics, and Jokowi’s desire to project a tougher image in the antecedent of national elections in 2019. Taking stock of the political incentives that influence this escalation in turn impacts how observers should best advocate for rules-based order and transparency in the Indonesian justice system.

A shift in policy

To fully grasp this shift, observers must first assess Jokowi’s record on anti-drug activities thus far. Indonesian anti-narcotics laws are notoriously draconian, mandating the execution of individuals caught trafficking drugs. Since taking office in 2014, Jokowi has cast himself as a hardliner on enacting drug-related policies, carrying out the execution of 18 convicted drug traffickers in a three-year period.¹ This figure stands in contrast to the use of the death penalty for narcotics traffickers by Jokowi’s predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. While President Yudhoyono approved a total of 21 executions between 2005 and 2013, only 3 of these cases were related to drugs or narcotics trafficking. Moreover, Yudhoyono’s term in office was marked by an unofficial moratorium on capital punishment between late 2008 and early 2013.

Though he has already taken a stance on narcotics stricter than most of his immediate predecessors, Jokowi has in recent months expressed the desire to engage in even more severe anti-drug efforts. On July 21, 2017, Jokowi stated that Indonesia was in a state of emergency due to widespread drug use, consequently instructing law enforcement officers that “if [narcotics suspects] resist a little bit, just shoot them immediately.”² Similarly, Tito Karnavian, the Indonesian national police chief who in 2016 strongly denied that his forces were to adopt a shoot-on-sight policy as it “leads to abuse of power,”³ has in recent months instructed officers “not to
hesitate shooting drug dealers who resist arrest.” Meanwhile, in response to criticism on the change in protocol, National Narcotics Agency (BNN) chief Budi Waseso opined that “people said that the BNN cannot shoot on the spot. Why not? There are too few drug dealers who are dead, while they have killed thousands of people.”

This stronger stance on drugs extends beyond mere rhetoric. Seventy-nine narcotics suspects died in drug-related extrajudicial killings in 2017, a chilling increase in shooting incidents relative to the 14 killings in 2016 and 10 killings in 2015. When discussing the 58,000 drug-related arrests made in 2017, BNN chief Waseso quipped, “we actually hoped that they would resist, so we could shoot them.” The increase in number of extrajudicial killings indicates that law enforcement officials have heeded Jokowi’s command, and are more than willing to exercise the license to kill as they see fit. As widespread drug abuse continues in Indonesia, criminal narcotics trafficking is an issue that should be handled with appropriate concern. However, Jokowi’s readiness to dispense with due process and transparency in the criminal justice system demonstrates a grievous disregard for human rights, and marks a clear and distinct escalation of violence in the battle against drugs.

**Electoral challenges and incentives**

Acknowledging the violent escalation of anti-drug efforts in turn raises the question of why Jokowi has chosen this line of action. Here, it is fruitful to turn to similar cases in Southeast Asia in which populist leaders turned to hardline anti-drug policies. Former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2003 enacted a violent campaign against narcotics trafficking, resulting in roughly 2,800 extrajudicial killings within the campaign’s first three months. More recently, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has embarked on a violent war on drugs, resulting in the killing of an estimated 12,000 suspected narcotics suspects since he took office in mid-2016.

Despite these atrocities, it is arguable that both Thaksin and Duterte faced limited amounts of domestic opposition against their anti-drug policies. Thaksin’s iron-fisted approach was said to be popular among communities that had been ravaged by drug abuse, while Duterte was propelled to office in part because of the expectation that he would institute a nationwide narcotics crackdown. With this in mind, Jokowi’s violent turn could be seen as a similar maneuver as that of Thaksin and Duterte, part of a trend of populists engaging in violent anti-drug campaigns, resulting in increased support among domestic hardliners.

Viewing the drug war as a vehicle for mobilizing political support is largely consistent with messaging from the Indonesian government. The use of capital
punishment, extrajudicial killings, and other extreme methods in the anti-drug campaign have long been discussed by Indonesian leaders within the context of their political utility. Speaking on an informal pause on the use of capital punishment against drug traffickers, Indonesian Attorney General M. Prasetyo on February 1, 2017, noted that that executions were put on hold as the government was “focusing on the greater interest for the time being,” namely Indonesia’s aspirations to become a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Similarly, in discussing the potential of reinstating a moratorium on the death penalty, Jokowi stated, “Why not? But I must ask my people. If my people say OK, they say yes, I will start to prepare.” That Jokowi seems cognizant of attitudes toward the anti-narcotics campaign and has still chosen to double down on such policies could be an indication of the strong political will behind these decisions. Thus, Jokowi’s shift in rhetoric on drugs should be seen as both product and tool of domestic political agendas, as well as possibly his electability in the upcoming 2019 presidential election.

As a means of bridging cleavages to prevent social division from harming his own prospects in 2019, Jokowi has in the past year galvanized the Indonesian public by adopting the image of a strong, nationalistic leader. Though he remains by far the most electable candidate in the field, Jokowi faces a major leadership challenge in the form of rising populism and xenophobia in Indonesia. Recently in the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election, a key Jokowi ally was elected out of office by a wave of hardline Islamist and nativist fervor. As a means of bridging cleavages to prevent social division from harming his own prospects in 2019, Jokowi has in the past year galvanized the Indonesian public by adopting the image of a strong, nationalistic leader. A survey of Indonesian voters found that 19.7 percent of respondents indicated that their support for a presidential candidate was most influenced by the candidate’s level of assertiveness, nearly double the number of respondents who preferred the second-most favored characteristic of the given candidate being a populist. While the above survey found that the death penalty itself was not the most important issue for voters (only 0.8 percent of respondents indicated that the death penalty specifically was the main reason they were satisfied with Jokowi), the assertive qualities associated with law-and-order candidates who enact such policies remain crucially important. Thus, in pursuit of shoring up his credentials as an assertive candidate to reduce the threat posed by his challengers, Jokowi seems to have taken cues from the intense support that...
buoyed Duterte to office, resulting in the adoption of increasingly authoritarian attitudes toward law enforcement and narcotics.

*Why and how should Washington respond?*

The looming threat of an increasingly violent crackdown on drugs in Indonesia should spark concern among policymakers in Washington and beyond. As one of the world’s largest democracies, Indonesia should in theory be well positioned to act in concert with the United States in promoting a secure, rules-based order across the Indo-Pacific. Yet, by openly favoring extrajudicial action in combating the drug crisis, Jokowi and other Indonesian leaders have demonstrated a willingness to bend the limits of the law in pursuit of political gain, marking a stain on Indonesia’s democratic success story. Given the geopolitical challenges posed by instability and a growing democratic deficit across the Indo-Pacific, the curtailment of Indonesia’s ability to act as a credible advocate for rules-based order and human rights norms should not be understated.

The escalation of anti-drug efforts should be of note to international observers as it directly impacts the safety and security of foreign nationals in Indonesia. Foreigners are often overrepresented in cases of drug-related extrajudicial killings, comprising 16 percent of fatal shootings between January and July 2017 relative to their status as only 1.7 percent of all suspects arrested by the BNN in that same period. Meanwhile, capital punishment cases also demonstrate an overrepresentation of foreigners, with foreign nationals involved in roughly 84 percent of drug-related executions since 1995. In reference to foreign drug traffickers, Jokowi in July 2017 stated, “I have told you, just be firm, especially with foreign drug dealers who enter the country and resist [upon arrest]. Gun them down. Give no mercy.” Thus, with regards to facing drug-related killings, whether legal or extrajudicial, foreign nationals seem to face disproportionate risk. As far as these anti-drug measures may be influenced chiefly by domestic electoral politics, its impact is transnational, and could demand a response from an international audience.

In March 2017, Indonesian authorities relocated at least seven death row prisoners to Nusa Kambangan, the notorious island prison where Indonesia carries out most of its drug-related executions. This group of prisoners, all foreign nationals, included U.S. citizen Frank Amado, who in 2010 was sentenced the death penalty for drug trafficking. If his sentence is carried out, Amado will be the first U.S. citizen executed by Indonesia. While U.S. State Department officials in 2011 stated that they would not intervene in the case, it is uncertain whether officials in the Trump administration would respond with similar restraint. Despite President Trump’s hardline rhetorical stance on drugs in the U.S., his nationalistic predilections make it entirely possible that the execution of a U.S. citizen by Indonesia could incite a diplomatic dispute.
Yet, in spite of the heightened risk that foreign nationals hold in becoming ensnared in Indonesian anti-drug efforts, policymakers in Washington and beyond should remain cautious in their criticism of Jokowi’s hardline shift, for fear of playing into the politicization of the anti-drug campaign. Political tensions and public division wrought by the contentious 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election have forced the Indonesian political establishment to lean strongly into nationalism as a unifying factor, fostering a wave of nationalist and anti-foreign sentiment. This makes it difficult for international actors to meaningfully engage with Indonesia on its anti-drug practices, for any appeals to curb extrajudicial killings could be easily dismissed as an affront to Indonesia’s sovereignty. During a diplomatic row over the then-imminent execution of Australian citizens Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, Indonesian minister of home affairs Tjahjo Kumolo in March 2015 dismissed international concerns about the executions, stating, “if there were a thousand Tony Abbotts it wouldn’t be an issue. Whoever it is—a thousand secretary generals of the U.N., a thousand prime ministers—Indonesia is a sovereign nation.” Similarly, Jokowi denounced foreign intervention in the case, saying “it is our sovereign right to exercise our law.” One can imagine that, if the United States or others were to criticize the recent spate of extrajudicial killings, Jokowi and other Indonesian leaders would likely respond in a similar way.

Conclusion

The invocation of sovereign rights in response to criticism on anti-drug policies carries consequence as to how policymakers and observers should best advocate for rules-based order and transparency in the Indonesian justice system. When framed in context of nationalism and sovereignty, drug executions and other extreme measures become more palatable to the Indonesian public, even among those who would otherwise oppose such policies. The public support galvanized by this emotional appeal in turn could legitimize and affirm the political utility of Jokowi’s decision to increase the severity of his war on drugs, bringing about the potential for further abuses of power. Thus, in order to prevent forcing a situation in which leaders and security forces are incentivized to crack down further, international actors who choose to confront Indonesia on the escalation of drug killings must remain cognizant of how their messaging will be received by the Indonesian public.

This is not to say the United States and other invested parties should not hold Indonesia accountable when it comes to extrajudicial killings and other rights abuses. These conversations must remain an integral component of U.S. foreign policy, an essential tool in establishing a normative framework for human rights and good governance in the region. However, given Jokowi’s apparent desire to lean into nationalist fervor in anticipation of the 2019 elections,
foreign observers must be cautious and thoughtful when addressing rights violations in Indonesia. Efforts to address the escalation must be formulated with a low-key and long-term approach in mind, as a means of reducing the incentive for Indonesian leaders to posture in shoring up nationalist support. Through coming to a broader understanding of the political forces that have spawned Jokowi’s war on drugs, human rights advocates will be better prepared in fighting for a more humane and transparent Indonesia.

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Endnotes
7 McRae, “Is Indonesia embarking on a Philippines-style war on drugs?”
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