

## Troubling display of populism

By Farish Noor

**OVER THE TOP:** *Indonesia's public burning of intruding Vietnamese fishing boats seems harsh and contrary to Asean's spirit of compromise and dialogue*

OVER the past two weeks, Indonesia-watchers worldwide have been struck by the tone that is being set by the Jokowi administration in Indonesia. Though he received wide support from well-wishers abroad during his election campaign, many had hoped that the new Jokowi-Kalla (President Joko Widodo-Vice-President Yusuf Kalla) administration would take a firm step towards introducing rationality, pragmatism and realism in Indonesia's domestic and international politics. Many were equally impressed by their long-term vision with regards to Indonesia's economy and the real economic-structural-institutional needs of the country's population.

While some of the steps that have been taken thus far have proven to be sensible and meaningful, others have raised the eyebrows of analysts and researchers who have been following Indonesian politics for decades.

Take the example of the burning of captured Vietnamese fishing boats that took place a week ago — an event that was highly publicised and which certainly gained popular support among the nationalists of the Indonesian electorate.

Jokowi had made it clear that part of his long-term agenda is to secure the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Indonesia's maritime territory, and to prevent Indonesia's natural wealth from being stolen by foreign nationals. In principle, there is nothing wrong with such a stand, and it is indeed laudable that the state does what it should do, which is to protect the territory and wealth of the nation.

But what is troubling about the incident of the public burning of the ships is that it was a demonstration of power in terms that seem harsh, over-the-top and contrary to the Asean spirit of compromise and dialogue. To complicate things further, Indonesia has now captured a number of Chinese fishing boats and may well be tempted to do the same thing again — though that is a potentially costly venture as China happens to be a major trading partner to Indonesia and has been courting the country publicly. Two factors beggar our consideration at present:

**FIRSTLY**, if the truth be told, we all know that fishing boats cross borders and wander into the territories of other countries in Asean waters all the time. This is not only true of Vietnamese and Chinese vessels, but is also true of Indonesian vessels that have been caught in neighbouring waters.

The disturbing thing about the burning of the Vietnamese boats is that it gives the impression that Indonesia is the only victim, when we all know this is not true. In the course of my research, I have met and interviewed Indonesian fishermen who have been caught in the waters of neighbouring countries, too, and I once interviewed a Sulawesi Bajao fisherman who had been arrested in Australian waters, of all places.

**SECONDLY**, the Indonesian government must realise that burning Vietnamese boats may seem a popular move at home, but such news will undoubtedly be met with scorn in Vietnam. In the past, such boats were captured, the crews arrested and escorted back to their home waters. Illegal fishing is a problem that the whole of Asean faces, and not Indonesia alone. But how would Indonesians feel if their boats were burned by other countries, if Vietnam retaliated likewise? Or if Australia decided to set alight Indonesian fishing boats caught in their waters?



*A Vietnamese fishing boat in flames after Indonesian*

*Navy officers blew up the vessel, which was illegally fishing in the remote Anambas Islands on Dec 5. The world's biggest archipelago nation is pushing to stop foreigners from illegally fishing in its water. AFP pic*

With Asean integration due around the corner, and 2015 set as the year where integration begins, the moves by Indonesia have gone against the spirit of the association, and can lead to the view that these are populist moves calculated to satisfy the electorate. But if every country in Asean followed the same path — pandering to populism, burning the ships of neighbours, etc — then where will Asean head to?

Asean has to be founded on firm bonds of kinship, shared histories and a shared destiny, and it will not be built on the ashes of burned wrecks.

***Farish Noor is Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, and Visiting Fellow at ISIS Malaysia***