
SHORT FEATURE

An Interview with Hassan Wirajuda

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WHO WOULD BE BETTER to explain about Indonesia's foreign policy rather than the person at the helm of it: the foreign minister. Hassan Wirajuda served two terms as the foreign minister: first, from 2001-2004 in the Megawati administration; and second, from 2004-2009 in the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) administration. The Indonesian Quarterly met with Hassan Wirajuda to ask him about his experiences as foreign minister.

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What were the challenges you immediately faced when taking over the helm of foreign policy during the early years of reform?

My eight and a half years as Indonesia's Foreign Minister is the biggest part, if not the core, of the first ten years of reform. It was particularly challenging because it was such an early period of reform, when a lot of things have not yet been settled, including in policy making and policy implementation.

Reform means a big and foundational change to the livelihood of a state. It is not revolution, as we witness in the Arab Spring; nonetheless, the objectives to make the changes are the same. We recognize that there are positive aspects that we should take from the past and we should keep those. On the other hand, we try to correct the mistakes of the old mechanism of policy making. Efforts to correct and create an anti-thesis of the bad practices were the main agenda of reform.

Specifically on foreign policy and diplomacy, one of the first consequences of reform is the recognition of new actors in foreign policy. During the Soeharto era, for so long, foreign policy was only the domain of the presidential palace and the foreign ministry. Since reform, there are new actors. The parliament now has greater role in policy making. There are the think tanks, media and private sector. This is something that has been quite common in the international arena, but was prohibited during the authoritarian rule.

So one of the first major things I did when appointed by Megawati, and then continued during SBY's first administration, was to internally reform the foreign ministry. I started this in 2002 by massively changing the organizational structure of the ministry, which I saw was very outdated to respond to the new challenges of diplomacy. One of the problems at the time was the imbalance between our bilateral, regional and multilateral diplomacies. I saw too much dominance of multilateral diplomacy; hence neglecting the bilateral side. This includes the imbalance in terms of the budget allocation for the directorate generals. Not many people thus would have a balanced perspective regarding the importance of both multilateral and bilateral diplomacy.

How did you reform the structure of the foreign ministry?

I wanted to dismiss the "exclusivist" nature of the multilateral directorates in the ministry. Such exclusiveness was evident in the way that

the multilateral directorates seemed to manage its own “team,” from the placement, promotions, and all of the career of its members. This ruins the integrity and the teamwork of the ministry.

Former Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, once said to me “I tried to reform the ministry, but it is not so easy.” That is true, but in a way I succeeded in making the corps more integrated. My efforts that started in 2002 brought about a foreign ministry that is more solid.

Aside from reforming the structure, I also needed to change the corporate culture. I had to admit that I did not have the ability to reform the bureaucracy with a “remuneration” approach. Many other ministries have tried this, but do not have the discretion to actually fulfill it. So I decided to manage the work culture, the corporate culture of the ministry. This was more realistic.

I also wanted a more open, merit-oriented, transparent, clean, and honest recruitment system and career planning. During my time climbing up the career ladder at the ministry, the system was very much rank-oriented. So people were not credited by merit. I wanted to change this because I did not want the newer generation to experience what I had.

For so long, throughout the Soeharto era, and then during the independence of East Timor Indonesia was marred by allegations of human rights violations. How did you view the diplomatic challenges?

Indonesia went through a lot, from being a military-dominated country to a democracy. I think what was wrong during the Soeharto era was basically an imbalanced concept of development, which gave prime seat to economic development, and for so long neglected the political development.

There was no check-and-balance. We had a strong executive body, but a weak parliament. A monopoly of power leads to monopoly of truth. The executive could do anything it wanted, which included gross violation of democracy.

The idea to establish a Human Rights Commission came out in 1989, and was realized in 1993. I was once sitting in the commission. It was established with the right mandates, and I think it was a good start.

From the diplomacy point of view, I experienced being in the front line bearing the name plate in Indonesia in international fora, and being the

receiving ends of all complaints and protests. It was hard, but I believe it is the responsibility of diplomacy, not only to project our national interest abroad, but also to communicate our developments internationally.

How about external challenges: what would you consider the most important global or regional events that had impacts on Indonesia's foreign policy during your time in office?

In my first term, in the Megawati administration, 9/11 happened in 2001, which had great impacts on international relations in general, and the foreign policy of countries, including Indonesia. There really is no preparation for an incident like this; we just had to deal with it. I remember how we had to quickly issue a firm statement. That evening, I had just arrived at home, so I took quick shower and called President Megawati's residence before going there. On the way to the president's residence I started drafting the points that should be in the statement in my small notebook. I then conveyed my ideas to the president. First, that Indonesia condemns the attack. Second, that Islam is a religion of peace and anti-violence. Third, terrorist attack is a threat to international peace and security. Fourth, therefore international cooperation is needed.

Quickly following 9/11, a misperception widely developed in the West with regards to Islam. Islam was quickly associated to violence, extremism, and terrorism. Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population, was inevitably brought into the picture.

I believe that the antidote for misperception is dialog. What I explained earlier about the multiple actors of foreign policy is thus very relevant in this case. We embraced the Nahdhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah and organized various dialogs. With Muhammadiyah we held the first Asia Pacific Regional Dialogue on Interfaith and Interculture. I was the only foreign minister that attended Nahdhatul Ulama's *istighasah*. That was in Surabaya in 2002, attended by thousands. I made a presentation about 9/11, and what it has implied to Islam.

Then, just two months into my second term, in the SBY administration, the Tsunami happened in December 2004, which also had great impacts to Indonesia's foreign relations and diplomacy. Tsunami is a disaster of a global scope, quoting Kofi Annan. Thus the disaster required global support. For Indonesia, the subsequent issue is how to manage the global aspiration to support.

Shortly after the tsunami occurred, President SBY called me and asked whether I could organize an international summit in 7 days, to urgently discuss the way to manage the disaster relief. I told him I could. I believed that in such emergency situation we just had to do it, although it seemed an almost impossible task. So I took the challenge, and it went very well. 27 heads of states plus heads of international organizations attended. I think the experiences we had with handling the tsunami and the subsequent disaster relief made Indonesia a good example of best practices in disaster relief.

ASEAN has been a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy. During your time in office, a lot of initiatives were achieved: ASEAN Security Community, East Asia Summit. What are your most memorable experiences in the framework of ASEAN?

In 2002 we started talking about ASEAN political and security community, where the core values are democracy, respect of human rights, governance, and conflict resolution. ASEAN integration used to emphasize only on economic development, but then we realize the importance of the promotion of diplomacy in ASEAN. A year later during the ASEAN Summit in Bali in 2003, ASEAN endorsed this new ASEAN community concept that is more balanced: economy, political-security, and socio-cultural. This is an achievement for Indonesia.

And later on the talks regarding East Asia Summit began. There were heavy debates regarding the need for this new summit that went on from 2003, then 2004 and 2005. I insisted that we had to develop a balanced and inclusive East Asia. East Asia is basically Northeast and Southeast, but we redefine it with the inclusion of India, Australia, and New Zealand with the spirit of balance and inclusivity, which formed the 13 countries of the first East Asia Summit. Nonetheless, I think now with the 18 members of East Asia Summit, the notion of "East Asia" has faded a bit.

How about relations with countries outside of East Asia?

I should mention about the Asia-Africa Summit. I remember during the Megawati presidency, the South African leader Thabo Mbeki asked for a meeting with the ASEAN leaders, which was intended to, among others, build a pact sheet with ASEAN. We then developed the idea to become in

the platform of Asia-Africa. The Summit itself, which was held in 2005, can be considered a milestone for Indonesia, particularly considering we were still domestically consolidating, we were not considered a “leader” in Asia, and what we promoted was mainly the spirit of cooperation. But we succeeded in making sure Bandung was agreed as the host for the Summit, which then was successful in my opinion.

Other than that, I view that the neighbors we have to the east of our archipelago, the Pacific islands, have been somewhat neglected. This is actually a concern, because until now we still have not fully resolved the separatist issue in Papua. I remember inviting Papua New Guinea to be a dialog partner in the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2000. I believe that meeting was more than just talks; it was a forum for us to learn so much more from Papua New Guinea.

Indonesia has something to offer in terms of technical cooperation to the Pacific islands countries. Yes, our diplomacy is not equipped with sufficient funding for technical cooperation. But I remember during the early years of the SBY administration I asked the Ministry of Agriculture to send a team of trainers and 12 hand-tractors to Fiji, which turned out to be a successful program. It was a good example of diplomacy. Such experiences stay in the mind of the recipient country.

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