

Indonesian protests over Australia spying revelations

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Angry protests erupted yesterday in the Indonesian cities of Jakarta and Yogyakarta over revelations this week that the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) had tapped the phones of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, his wife and eight senior officials. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has publicly refused to comment on the exposure or apologise, further inflaming anti-Australian sentiment in Indonesia.

The protest in Jakarta at the Australian embassy involved about 200 people mobilised by right-wing nationalist organisations such as the Laskar Merah Putih militia (Red and White Brigade) and Pemuda Panca Marga, a group based among the children of military veterans. The protesters burnt Australian flags and threatened retaliatory action unless Canberra issued a formal apology over the spying.

Other protesters called for a boycott of Australian goods and companies, and a complete diplomatic break with Canberra. Red and White Brigade chairman Adek Erfil Manurung declared that his organisation and other groups would be back next Wednesday with 10 times as many people and would attempt to occupy the Australian embassy. Another group known as the People's Coalition for Defence and Security (KMPH) is also reportedly planning to a demonstration outside the diplomatic mission.

In the lead-up to elections next year, politicians and political parties are seeking to exploit the phone-tapping revelations for their own purposes. Parliamentarian Ruhut Sitompul, from Yudhoyono's Democratic Party, took part in yesterday's protest and declared his support for the Red and White Brigade. He denounced the spying "by those imperialists" since Suharto's time. He called for the president to take harsher action if Abbott did not apologise.

Indonesian politicians have pointed to the last major diplomatic crisis between Jakarta and Canberra over the Australian military intervention into East Timor in 1999, supposedly to protect pro-independence Timorese from military-backed militias such as the Red and White Brigade. The intervention, supported by Washington, was driven Australian imperialist interests, particularly to ensure control of the lion's share of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves.

In a bid to contain widespread public hostility, Yudhoyono has recalled the Indonesian ambassador to Canberra and on Wednesday suspended military and intelligence cooperation with Australia. In a series of tweets earlier this week, the president made clear that the Abbott government's refusal to comment on intelligence matters, or to offer assurances that the spying would cease, was unacceptable.

Yesterday Yudhoyono sent a letter to Abbott insisting on an explanation. While the letter's contents have not been made public, presidential spokesman Teuku Faizasyah told Fairfax Media: "It's not a question of apologising, but a question of explaining and clarifying what has happened. That is why we have put emphasis on a new protocol, an agreement to set up cooperation on intelligence gathering in future. Otherwise we cannot consider it's enough."

The latest revelations follow other recent exposures based on documents leaked by former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden. These included the use of US and Australian diplomatic missions throughout Asia, including in Jakarta, to carry out widespread electronic surveillance of phone and data. Another report from the joint US-Australian spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia revealed electronic spying on the 2007 international climate change conference in Bali.

Yudhoyono himself has sought to strengthen relations, especially military ties, with the US and Australia, which makes the tapping of his phone all the more galling. Given the widespread calls in the Indonesian media and parliament for tough action, the president's retaliatory response has been rather measured.

In his speech on Wednesday, Yudhoyono declared: "I know Indonesians are upset and angry about what Australia has done to Indonesia. But in international relations, in dealing with certain situations, we cannot be emotional, we must be rational. Our reactions will determine the future of the relationship and friendship between Indonesia and Australia, which actually have been going well."

Yudhoyono is well aware that it is not just ties with Australia that are threatened, but also those with the United States. All the information gathered by Australian agencies is done so in direct collaboration with their US counterparts, including the NSA, under the so-called Five Eyes intelligence sharing agreement that also involves Britain, Canada and New Zealand. Like its counterparts throughout Asia, the Yudhoyono administration has been seeking to balance its military ties with the US against its burgeoning economic relations with China.

The newly-elected Abbott government is desperately seeking to limit the damage to Australian-Indonesian relations and its own foreign policy. During the campaign for the September election, Abbott declared that "Jakarta, not Geneva" would be the focus of his government's orientation. His first overseas trip as prime minister was to Jakarta, where he sought Indonesian cooperation in implementing his reactionary policy of preventing refugee boats from reaching Australia.

More fundamentally, Yudhoyono's decision to suspend military and intelligence exchanges strikes at the efforts of both the US and Australia to strengthen ties as part of the Obama administration's military build-up throughout Asia, aimed at encircling China. At the top level Australia United States Ministerial (AUSMIN) talks held in Washington this week, the Australian foreign and defence ministers reaffirmed the Abbott's government's full support of Obama's so-called "pivot" to Asia, including the stationing of US Marines in northern Australia and US access to other

Australian military bases.

The final AUSMIN communiqué released yesterday stated that Australian and US ministers "agreed to seek opportunities to increase defence cooperation with Indonesia". But that is precisely what has been called into question by the revelations of US and Australian spying on top Indonesian leaders. US Secretary of State John Kerry and Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop both flatly refused to comment about the spying on Indonesia at a joint press conference.

In his third address to parliament this week on the issue, Prime Minister Abbott yesterday acknowledged that he had received President Yudhoyono's letter and promised to respond "swiftly, fully and courteously." Abbott and senior ministers are reportedly in crisis talks seeking to find a way to end the diplomatic standoff after the Indonesian president, who is trying to prevent public anger at home from spinning out of control, rejected previous empty private assurances.



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