

# **Aftermath of the Tsunami: Three Leadership Styles, Three Challenges**

By Eric Teo Chu Cheow

The different leadership styles of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in organizing relief and reconstruction after the Dec. 26 tsunami hold important lessons for managing peace, politics and stability in the region.

Thaksin adopted a hands-on CEO style approach. Taking charge of the relief operations, he was on the beaches of south Thailand within 24 hours after the disaster, comforting both foreign tourists and local residents, as well as overwhelmed Thai relief workers.

Thaksin had the military and police on the job right immediately. Later he took decisive measures, such as exhuming corpses for DNA tests and firing his metrological chief for failing to warn of the tsunami. This approach paid off as he and his Thai Rath Thai Party won an unprecedented victory in elections, gaining control of 376 of 500 seats in Parliament.

Although secure politically, thanks to his effective management style and organization, Thaksin will still be tested by the reconstruction challenge, especially by the efforts to redress lost tourism and to enact social programs in affected areas. More importantly, he must pacify the troubled Muslim south and perhaps deal with a potential avian flu epidemic.

Yudhoyono, on the other hand, adopted a more subtle "Javanese" approach of handling the relief disaster program from behind the scenes and delegating actual management to Vice President Yusuf Kalla and other ministers. Still, he has visited the affected area four times.

Yudhoyono has also seized the moment to press ahead for talks with Acehese separatists. The second round of talks was held recently in Helsinki.

He has been active internationally, hosting the ASEAN tsunami summit in Jakarta, which scored more points for him politically. He has also been forced to ensure that financial aid is channeled to the needy rather than into the pockets of corrupt political and military officials.

In addition, Yudhoyono has appealed to Indonesians to assist those affected by the disaster in Aceh, urging debt moratorium for affected countries. Jakarta can expect relief on some \$3.2 billion in debts this year.

Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether Indonesians appreciate his style of

leadership and his low-key management of the tsunami disaster relief effort.

Badawi has had an easier task than Thaksin and Yudhoyono as the damage to his country was far less serious. The number of deaths was limited to 68, and all victims were Malaysian.

The main issue for Badawi involves state assistance to rebuild or replace damaged property. The cumbersome bureaucratic red tape involved in ensuring that aid is disbursed honestly has been criticized by the public. But the method of disbursement fits Badawi's wider agenda of improving Malaysia's delivery of public goods and services.

He is expected to use the tsunami disaster to press for better coordination of Malaysia's public services, especially in the wake of the Jan. 15 power failure that plunged more than a third of Malaysia, including the capital, into darkness for almost three hours. Malaysia's bureaucracy is in for a real shakeup from its efficiency-minded premier.

The three styles of leadership in crisis management bear out the personalities and character of the leaders, but more importantly, they give us an indication of the future of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, as these countries strive for economic growth, social redistribution and harmony in a prospering and stable Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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