

OPINION

Don't be losers Yogya, the future is yours

Saptopo B Ilkodar
YOGYAKARTA

The ongoing debate over the government-sponsored bill on the special status of Yogyakarta has exacerbated challenges facing the sultanate city. The problems intertwine and have to be dealt with properly by the Yogyakarta people, or else the future history books will label them as losers.

The first challenge is the adverse impacts of the Mt. Merapi eruptions over the last couple of months. Until today thousands of people, especially those whose houses are totally damaged, are staying at refugee camps. The most pressing need that both the central and local governments have to fulfill is rebuilding their livelihoods, including recovery of their rice fields, farmlands and businesses that they lost and the education of their children.

As soon as the government lowered the Merapi status by one level from the top alert, many of the displaced persons returned home, only to face new problems such as the

absence of clean water, electricity supply and malfunctioning public facilities.

They have no access to clean water since their wells where they used to get water are blocked by volcanic materials. Other wells may remain unaffected, but the pipelines connecting them and the people are broken.

The second problem is the local people's perception of Merapi and the danger of its potential eruptions. Soon after an infotainment program of a private TV channel broadcast a forecast of a bigger explosion of Merapi, people left Yogyakarta en masse. It was worsened by rumors of eruptions that spread through short messages. Those clearly show that many Yogyakarta people believe in baseless prophecy.

What matters is the phenomenon is occurring in a city laden with prominent universities and schools, which is why Yogyakarta is dubbed the city of education. Such a status suggests that all aspects of life are guided by common sense and scientific inquiry. But that's not the case in Yogyakarta.

Meanwhile Yogyakarta is also known as a center of Javanese cul-

ture, which respects supernatural things. It is at that intersection that Yogyakarta society should handle their current problems properly.

Remember that at the time of the first eruption on Oct. 26, people were split over long-time Merapi spiritual guardian (Juru kuncit) Mbah Maridjan, who was among those killed by pyroclastic ashes gushing out of the volcano. Some ridiculed his choice to stay at his home rather than evacuating himself. Others believed that his choice amounted to his responsibility and loyalty to his job. Here logic confronted cultural beliefs.

Realizing the complexity and huge challenges in rehabilitating and rebuilding after the Merapi eruptions, activists and local leaders are calling on local people to live in harmony with Merapi. In the previous two months they have pushed for scientific logics and dismissed Mbah Maridjan's belief in a harmonious coexistence between Merapi and local people.

The problems indicate that Yogyakarta's society really needs a cultural leader in the broadest meaning in which science and education are seen as part of culture. The leader, of

course, should be the sultan.

It was ironic, however, when it appeared many people believed in Mbah Maridjan more than in the sultan when it came to the Merapi eruptions. Even Mbah Maridjan often stated that he would leave Merapi only if the order came from the person who gave him the mandate to guard the volcano, who was the late Hamengkubuwono IX, the father of the current Yogyakarta sultan and governor Hamengkubuwono X.

Observers noticed that many people challenged the governor's order for civil servants to go to work by bicycle, his idea to build a parking area under the sultanate's northern square and his decree on the regional minimum wage. Conversely, people have noted very well his political maneuverings which have been on the rise in the last few years. They also carefully take note of whether he will give an inaugural speech.

The third problem is the heated debate over whether the special status of Yogyakarta includes the appointment of the sultan as the ex-officio governor of the province, a regulation that has been in place for more than 60 years. Taking his

tory into consideration, the majority of the provincial legislature agrees convention should be maintained as an inseparable part of the special status of Yogyakarta, rather than accept the central government's proposal for the governor to be chosen via a direct election in accordance with democracy.

All political parties at the House of Representatives, except President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party, stand to maintain the existing practice. Yogyakarta people have staged rallies in a show of support for the special status.

In the name of harmony and politeness almost no one in Yogyakarta dares to openly express a dissenting opinion. Not even scholars who took part in the drafting of the bill on the special status of Yogyakarta. The question is whether the appointment mechanism is the best way for Yogyakarta tomorrow and beyond.

It is true that everybody should take history into account, but they should also consider the sultanate tradition concerning succession. Who will be the next sultan? How about his capacity to lead people in the face of more complex challenges

standing in between Yogyakarta and a dream to become a world-class city of education without having to lose its cultural roots?

Looking at daily life in Yogyakarta, the city appears no different from those in the rest of the country. Like other provinces, Yogyakarta faces problems of corruption, acts of violence, crimes and many other social ills. So, where do Yogyakarta's values lie?

Just as other provinces in Indonesia deal with drug abuse, free sex, traffic congestion and so forth, so does Yogyakarta. It is in this context Yogyakarta society should exercise their wisdom in responding to the debate over the bill.

Most likely, Yogyakarta's society will prevail in the discourse. But surely this would be a superficial victory that would have only short-term benefits. Who can guarantee their victory will be beneficial for all of Yogyakarta's people in the long run?

The writer is a lecturer at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at UPN Veteran in Yogyakarta.