INDONESIA’S GECKO-GATE

It’s not about us. Yudhoyono postponed his trip because he is facing his own Watergate

TIM LINDSEY

THE cancellation last week by Indonesia’s President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of his trip here is hardly a sign of deterioration in the bilateral relationship.

Regardless of issues between Australia and Indonesia over asylum-seekers, Yudhoyono would have to cancel anyway; he is up to his neck in an enormous domestic scandal that many Indonesians say is starting to look like their Watergate.

Outside the port of Tanjung Pinang the fate of the Sri Lankans who arrived on Australia’s Oceanic Viking has received little attention in Indonesia.

Instead, the nation is riveted by televised Constitutional Court hearings, explosive press conferences and a daily diet of rolling media revelations uncovering what may be the country’s biggest political crisis since the fall of Suharto in 1998.

At the heart of it all is Indonesia’s popular anti-corruption commission (KPK). Originally expected to be the latest in a long and unhappy line of toothless, gutless or silenced anti-corruption initiatives, it quickly proved itself anything but.

Energetic, determined and courageous, it used aggressive new tactics involving electronic surveillance and carefully managed stings to chase some very big fish.

It targeted legislators at the local and national levels, as well as ministers, governors, police, prosecutors, judges and reserve bank governors. And it enjoyed a spectacular 100 per cent success rate in court.

Unsurprisingly, Indonesia’s “untouchables” are strongly supported by the public, weary of decades of being farmed by a corrupt public sector.

Equally unsurprisingly, the KPK is hated and feared by Indonesia’s ruling elite.

Now secret wiretaps have revealed a huge, multi-agency elite conspiracy to destroy the KPK that involves, so far, a murder, a love triangle, a bank collapse, stolen funds, frame-ups by senior police and prosecutors and, of course, lots and lots of bribery — and (accurately or not) Yudhoyono is named on the tapes as supporting it.

Before the recent presidential polls Yudhoyono had to watch the KPK send his son’s father-in-law, Aulia Pohan (a former deputy governor of the reserve bank), to jail for bribery.

At the time Yudhoyono won great kudos for this, strengthening his reputation as anti-corruption campaigner and champion of rule of law, and he won a second term in a landslide.

But these events caused great pain in his family and his government has since expressed concerns that the KPK has become far too powerful, remarks endorsed by nervous politicians in Indonesia’s legislature, the DPR.

The speculation in Jakarta is that Yudhoyono may therefore have been happy to let others wipe out the KPK, with a nod and a wink. In any case, what followed were a series of attacks on the KPK. It began with the arrest of the KPK’s head, Antasari Azhar, for the murder of the husband of his golf-caddy mistress. He denies this and last week a key prosecution witness, a dodgy policeman called Williard Wizar, claimed he had falsified his original evidence as part of the plot.

Then came a tangled tale of corruption arising from the collapse of Bank Century. The KPK investigation into claims of bribes to secure a government bail-out led to questions about Vice-President Boediono and Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati. Allegations followed that KPK Deputy commissioners Bibit Rianto and Chandra Hamzah solicited bribes from the brother of a wealthy businessman and key graft suspect named Anggoro. Bibit and Chandra were detained in September, but wiretaps played on national television suggest the case against them was a conspiracy by the police and prosecutors in cahoots with Anggoro’s family and various mysterious middlemen, one of whom has admitted to the plot. And the 270 minutes of wiretaps even included a plan to murder Chandra.
Police chief of detectives Susno Duadji, implicated in the plot, sneered that the war between the KPK and the police was a fight between a gecko and a crocodile. The result was demonstrations across the country in favour of the gecko, a media feeding frenzy and a Facebook campaign that has attracted 1.3 million members.

Bibi and Chandra — who, with the gecko, are stars of millions of posters and T-shirts — were released but, incredibly, the police are still proceeding against them.

Yudhoyono was forced to appoint an independent fact-finding commission, the “Team of Eight” led by Indonesia’s most prominent lawyer and law reform advocate, Adnan Buyung Nasution.

Its findings, announced on Tuesday, only confirmed popular perceptions of a vast, multi-agency conspiracy.

This scandal goes to the heart of the government’s legitimacy and shows no sign of letting up. So far Gecko-gate has forced the resignation of Duadji and deputy attorney-general Abdul Hakim Ritonga. The big question now is who is next? Attorney-General and cabinet member Hendarman Supandji and police chief Bambang Hendarso Danuri are clearly in the firing line, but exactly how much did the President and his staff know?

No wonder Yudhoyono decided to take a rain check on his trip to Australia (and East Timor and Papua New Guinea, too, by the way). The political rhetoric that his cancellation was just about our asylum-seeker problems was way off mark. Perhaps it is a useful reminder that not everything that happens in our region is all about us (Australia), although you wouldn’t know it listening to our parliament.

Tim Lindsey is director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne.