Indonesia features prominently at EUROSEAS conference

Over 400 scholars from all over the world — mostly from Asia and Europe — met in the French capital for four days of discussions on Asia-Europe ties, local autonomy, socio-religious conflicts and many other issues related to Indonesia and other Southeast Asian states.

As the largest nation in Southeast Asia with the greatest population of Muslims in the world, Indonesia was one of the main topics of discussion at the 4th European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EUROSEAS) conference, which was held from Sept. 1 to Sept. 4 at the centuries-old University of Paris.

With its vast territory, 220 million-strong population, political dynamism, socio-religious complexities and conflicts and its ongoing efforts at democratization, Indonesia featured prominently in the majority of the 32 panel- and three round table discussions at the EUROSEAS conference.

The four-day conference began with keynote addresses from French Minister Delegate of International Cooperation, Development and Francophony M. Xavier Darcos and the Philippines’ former minister of foreign affairs Domingo L. Siason, Jr.

In his speech, Darcos emphasized that France’s interest in Asia had never wavered, though it had undergone sweeping changes over time and taken on new dimensions.

"Asia holds a genuine attraction for the French population: it surprises us, it fascinates and it excites our curiosity," he said.

Darcos also said France attached great importance to the relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

A special round table discussion was chaired by Delfin Colome, executive director of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), on "The Impact of EU/ASEM Enlargement: Threat or Opportunity for Asia Relations" on the first day of the conference. The ASEF was one of the main organizers of the 4th EUROSEAS.

"This discussion is so relevant because it is being held just four weeks prior to next month’s Asia-Europe Meeting of heads of state in Hanol," ASEF director for intellectual exchange Bertrand Fort told The Jakarta Post on the sidelines of the conference.

An Indonesian delegate also concurred with Fort’s view, saying the discussion would enhance the understanding of the overall state of EU-ASEAN relations.

"EUROSEAS is doing a good job by organizing this kind of discussion on EU-ASEAN relations," Gunaryadi, a research fellow at the University of Portsmouth who presented a paper on the EU's visibility in Indonesia, told the Post.

The conference’s second day focused on Panel 31, which dealt with regional autonomy in Southeast Asia in general and Indonesia in particular.

For several years, a large number of foreign scholars have been conducting various studies about the political impact of decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia.

Ana Lounela, a young researcher from the University of Helsinki in Finland, was one of the many academics who visited Indonesia in this context.

"I stayed in a village called Ngadisono in Wonosobo regency in Central Java for one year to observe and analyze power relations at the village level at the time of regional autonomy," Lounela told the panel.

Carol Warren, an Indonesian expert from Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, said the Indonesian government introduced local autonomous legislation with an objective to assuage discontent in the regions and to bring about greater popular participation in the political process.

However, several speakers of the panel argued that the introduction of regional autonomy had led to new problems and tensions. Due to several overlapping regulations, it was not clear who was in control — the central government or regional authorities — while collusion had led to environmental destruction in several provinces.

One participant even went so far as to suggest that the centralized system was far better than the decentralized.

The third day drew a large crowd with "Violence in Southeast Asia: Ethnicity, Nationalism and Religion" held by Panel 33, which focused mainly on case studies rather than a general analysis.

The last day of the meeting focused on the impact of the 1997 financial crisis.

Ironically, neither the French media nor foreign media gave much coverage on the EUROSEAS conference.

Kartini, from the National University of Singapore, believed the media may have been preoccupied with the hostage-taking of two French journalists in Iraq and the Beslan tragedy in Russia.