

Islam and Democracy in Indonesia

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Why talk about Indonesia? There are four major reasons:

1. Indonesia is the world's largest, least understood country (according to former Congressman Jim Leach, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific).
2. Indonesia is a striving democracy and its survival is important not only for Southeast Asia stability but also for United States and Western interests and values.
3. Indonesia is undergoing a "struggle for the soul of Islam" over the role of religion in society. That this debate is occurring is positive and is contributing to the de-legitimization of radical and violent Islamism.
4. Indonesia is an exemplar for Muslim majority countries outside the Middle East.

I have three takeaway concepts I wish for you to learn from today's discussion:

1. Democracy is succeeding in Indonesia; it is imperfect but is evolving and consolidating.
2. There is "pushback" against Islamic extremism. Indonesia's multicultural, multiethnic, syncretic and forbearing society is coalescing to defeat religious radicalism, but it will be a long process.
3. Indonesian society is complex; there is no convenient or easy assessment.

Indonesia is very important to the United States. There are good prospects for building a strong cooperative relationship with Indonesia based on improved and deeper understanding on both sides.

DIFFERING IMAGES OF INDONESIA

Seth Mydans, in the *New York Times* of January 12, 2008, presented a positive picture, saying:

From one of the most centralized and controlled countries....[Indonesia] has transformed itself into one of the most decentralized, free, open and self-regulating. From a brutal and corrupt regime under the heel of the military, it has become the standard bearer of democracy in Southeast Asia.
(Contrast this with the current situation in Thailand and the Philippines where there has been backsliding on open democracy.)

Other testimony cited by Mydans:

Indonesia is a “good news story,” according to former U.S. Ambassador Skip Boyce. The biggest news is that there is no crisis, according to Douglas Ramage, country director of The Asia Foundation in Jakarta.

It is noteworthy that Indonesia did not disintegrate or fall into a “tumult of mini-wars” as many, including top U.S. officials, believed at the time of the fall of the 35-year regime of President Suharto. Likewise Indonesia was “not engulfed in Islamic radicalism” as feared with the assertion of radical Islamism and terrorism once liberalization set in after Suharto’s fall.

There are, however, important downsides seen in the performance of democratic government since 1999:

- there is a “delivery deficit” in social programs, infrastructure and grassroots economic development;
- some say there is only a “procedural democracy” with elites enjoying the benefits although political freedom is enjoyed by all; and
- “everyday governance” falls short because of widespread corruption, bureaucratic gridlock and ineptitude, and personality-centered politics.

ISLAMIZATION

The Economist magazine, also of January 12, 2008, observed that Indonesia is undergoing “creeping Islamization.” On the popular level, ostensibly Islamic religious practices are making a comeback. One recent example is the symbolic female circumcision practiced by Muslims in Bandung, West Java, where the Assalam Foundation conducts group ceremonies which were described as “humane” in the *New York Times* of January 20, 2008.

On a broad political level, there is suppression of Muslim sects, such as the Ahmadiyah; there is repression by Muslim extremists of Christian churches; sectarian violence is continuing in central Sulawesi (Celebes); and the Ministry of Religion recently barred the visit of a liberal Islamic scholar from Egypt. Moreover, the seemingly unchecked power of the Islamic Defenders’ Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI), and other violence-inclined groups, is great cause for concern because they encompass al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) fellow travelers. The JI runs at least a dozen Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, and there is uncoordinated, unchecked and erratic implementation of *syariah* laws and standards of conduct on the local level.

One in ten Indonesians, according to a 2006 poll, believes that violence to defend the faith is acceptable. And there is concern over the growth of new political groups like the PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* or Prosperous Justice Party), which is closely similar to the AKP of Prime Minister Erdogan in Turkey, because they may represent an Islamic state philosophy masquerading under the banners of good governance and anti-corruption.

On the other hand, Islam-based parties garnered only 18-21% of the popular vote in recent elections, a number that is not inconsistent with the outcome for them in Indonesia's first free election in 1955. Also, mitigating the political impact of Islamic parties are the results of the widespread local elections during the past two-and-a-half years in which no strictly sectarian Muslim candidate has won.

TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Sidney Jones, distinguished analyst of the International Crisis Group (ICG) has cited poorly managed communal tensions at the local level in Sulawesi and elsewhere as one of the great challenges facing the government in stemming Islamic radicalism and violence. Extremists are shifting away from brute violence and are now preaching revivalism (*dakwah*). Despite setbacks and reduced cadres because of more effective police and intelligence work, JI and other extremists reportedly are looking for new training sites, while some of the most violent leaders have fled to the southern Philippines. Abu Bakar Basyir, the JI's *mullah*, however, is still preaching, writing, publishing and appearing on TV — all the while recruiting new followers to his brand of radicalism. Meanwhile, Hizbut Thahrir and salafist groups are unchecked and there are reports they are infiltrating the two mass Islamic organizations — the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah.

Christian radical groups, especially from Maluku (Moluccas) and Sulawesi, are still embedded. Violence can erupt any time in those areas.

Most importantly, the government this week refused to take a stand on the local implementation of *syariah* practices (except in Aceh where Islamic law is sanctioned), thus making it likely that court challenges will ensure over the constitutionality of local Islamic statutes. In this setting, non-Muslims, less and non-observant Muslims risk becoming second class citizens without legal protections.

MODERATE PUSHBACK

Despite the uneven picture cited above, there has been successful "pushback" since the second Bali bombing in 2005 which convinced national leaders and ordinary Indonesians that their countrymen could promote violence in the name of Islam. Greater public awareness, law enforcement successes and improved surveillance (for example, in the maritime border area of Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia) have placed pressure on militants. "Counter-radicalization" efforts by national religious groups have had some success; through a re-definition of terrorism, making it *haram* (forbidden) under Islam, and public campaigns to counter efforts in parliament and elsewhere to impose Islamic norms, there is increased realization that Indonesia's characteristically tolerant society is under threat. Attention to religious education, including the *pesantren modern* movement, is also having effect against radical ideology.

Today there is a vibrant public debate over the role of religion in society. This is set against a background of rising Islamic piety in Southeast Asia since the mid-1970s (the *dakwah* movement), but also rebuffs to the adoption of the Jakarta Charter, which explicitly would adopt Islam as the national religion and basis for government, in two votes in parliament since the onset of democracy. And the implementation of *syariah* in Aceh is controversial, although it is legal there, because there has been uneven application of Islamic strictures; there is evidence that poorer women and people in rural areas have suffered unfairly, and the governor who took office a year ago is secular-minded and opposes it.

What are the remedies? According to the chairman of the NU, Hasyim Muzadi, who visited Washington two weeks ago, greater efforts should be made to support the “Islamic middle” against extremism. He noted parenthetically that the United States and others in the West have tended to “pay too much attention” to Islamic liberals, whereas it is the moderates who need to be bolstered. Greatly increased educational opportunities in the U.S. and the West, increased student exchanges (including on the high school level), and more effective public diplomacy are needed. “Connectedness” for Islamic populations throughout the country, openness and good government are the best counteractions to radicals and violent extremism.

FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

There is a parallel debate going on over the future of democratic government. Some politicians and observers, notably including Vice President Kalla, have complained that there is “too much democracy” and that insufficient economic benefits have flowed to the broad mass of Indonesians. Hasyim Muzadi complained that “there are too many elections” that are a “waste of money” and only “confuse the people.”

Polling, however, has indicated that fifty-seven percent support a secular, non-Islamic state, while 33% loosely support “Islamic values.” Thirteen percent support the objectives of the FPI and kindred radical groups but few (0.7%) say they have been involved in such groups. (Indonesia Survey Institute poll of October 2007). An earlier LSI poll in September 2006 affirmed that eighty-two percent of those polled thought democracy is the best form of government and eighty-five believed that democracy and Islam are compatible. This is really good news. At the other end of the spectrum, one in ten believed agreed with the violent objectives of JI in “defending Islam.”

Clearly Indonesia is a “striving democracy” but major improvement is needed in the following areas: anti-corruption, civil service reform, bureaucratic performance, and center-local relations, including definition of the separation of powers, taxation and economic rights. Political party reform will come as the effects of the local elections are felt and new leaders already are emerging on the provincial and local levels. It is also clear that the economy needs strengthening, particularly regarding job creation and the improvement of social infrastructure.

NET ASSESSMENT

It is too soon to be comfortable but Indonesia’s “democratic space” provides room for most societal interests. More rigor is needed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and the government in implementing key programs because the risk of

failure is too great. The 2009 election season has already begin, just as we in the United States are in the throes of it, hence major endeavors on the part of the national leadership will likely be left until a new government takes office (Yudhoyono is the favored candidate thus far).

To cite Rizal Sukma, deputy director of the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta, there is no “one size fits all” democracy and Indonesia is too large and diverse. It is important for Indonesia to uphold the democratic values of accountability, transparency and fundamental freedoms. In this way, we can look forward to a “continual refinement” of democracy in Indonesia, not replacement of it.