

OPINION

Tour of Democracy in Indonesia

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Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago, spanning the seas between Asia and Australia. Its geography has determined the nature of its history. Its separate islands have developed their own characters and there are huge differences between various groups inhabiting these islands in terms of language, custom, and culture. Nonetheless the seas have bound the islands together.

Indonesia is a country where religion plays a dominant role all walks of life. However, no particular religion like Islam or Hinduism or Christianity stands as a dividing force for the society there. Islam came to Indonesia through peaceful means unlike its vigorous entry into other states in the sub-region or in South Asia. Indonesians have accepted Islam while the influence

of other religions ranging from Hinduism and Buddhism to animism. If one were to discuss the role of religion in the political system of Indonesia, without doubt, one can see that it has existed as a big force but somehow it has never been made itself available as a tool to be manipulated by any leader or group to reap a good political harvest. A number of orthodox Islamic movements have originated from Java and spread to the other islands but somehow they have failed to garner enough support from the masses to emerge as a superior political force. "Unity in Diversity", has been Indonesia's national motto, which aptly characterizes its national identity. More than 300 ethnic groups and languages co-exist there, though Bhasa Indonesia, the national language, is spoken throughout the archipelago. More than 60 per cent of the total population of Indonesia is concentrated in Java and most of

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them are adherents of Islam. So far, all the Presidents of Indonesia have come from Java.

In whole of the Indonesian history, religion has played an important role in determining the nature of the kingdoms, politics and also way of life. From king to the statesman, all intermingled religion with politics to save their kingdoms or to preserve their power. Of all the world religions, Islam is perhaps the most comprehensive in its insistence on the appropriateness of a direct relationship between religion and politics.

Classical Islamic theology and social theory envisaged a society, which was thoroughly regulated according to the tenets of shariah (divine law). Politics was encompassed within the overarching authority of the religious imperative. Sovereignty belonged to God, while the Caliph exercised spiritual authority whose duty was to implement shariah defend the faith and dispense justice. As in all Southeast Asian Kingdoms, in the past the Sultan's position was a sacred one. The Sultan was the source of legitimacy, but he was not actually endowed with real power. To give substance to the sacred legitimacy the Sultan needed the support of the *Ulue-balang-s*, (receiver of regular

salary), who for their post derived their authority from the Sultan's proclamation of their position.

Diversity exists within Indonesian Islam, which is essentially divided between modernist and traditionalist orientations. Islamic modernism, introduced into Indonesia at the end of the 19th century, has received social and political expression through the activities of several organizations: the first modernist organization, Muhammadiyah, established in 1912, the avowedly political Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia (PSII) which was especially influential among Islamic circles in the 1920s and 1930s, the politically assertive Masyumi, the most important Islamic party in the 1950s before its dissolution in 1960 by presidential decree, and Partai Muslim Indonesia (Parmusi) established in 1966 and for a time envisioned as Masyumi's successor. Islamic tradition has received political and social expression through the existence of Nahdatul Ulema (Renaissance of the Islamic Scholars). Nahdatul Ulema was established in 1926 by a number of East Javanese Ulemas (religious teachers) who united to combat the threat presented to their traditionalist religious beliefs by the rapid growth of Muhammadiyah.

Modernists contended that traditionalist Islam had for too long been mixed in a work of stagnation and superstition and that a return to the purity of the Quran and Hadith and acceptance of the right of individual interpretation in religious matters would demonstrate that Islam was in tune with material and scientific progress.

The first organization set up by the modern western educated Priyayi elite, sought improvement for the people's welfare in general and the establishment of educational institutions in particular. As government official they attempted renovation within the existing social framework which conformed to the existing political order, rather than a radical change in the social order. Budi Utomo (Glorious Endeavour) established in 1908, soon followed by Sarekat Islam in 1912, were organizations with a definite structure and staffed by personnel who carried out the purpose of the movement. It is held that the Budi Utomo initiated the Nationalist Movement which had a cultural rather than political aim, but there is no doubt that the founding members also had political aims in mind.

Indonesia is a country where Muslims are in majority; the current trend of Islamic politics around thw

world has strengthened the role of Islam in the political system of Indonesia. If one goes back to history here, one finds that the Dutch colonial masters left Indonesian Islam in several divisions, according to the diversified society of Indonesia. When Soekarno became the first President of Indonesia, the Islamic clergies or the Ulemas were quite hopeful that Soekarno as a student of a the madrassa would fulfill their political aspirations. However, he proved them wrong and by establishing the Pancasila as the main principle driving the constitution of Indonesia Soekarno left very little hope in the hearts of the Ulemas to go openly among the public to garner their support for a theocratic state.

The rise of political Islam in post-Soeharto Indonesia is clear from several trends. First, the establishment of a great number of "Islamic parties" that mostly adopt Islam as their basis replacing Pancasila. Second, increasing demands from certain groups of Muslims for the official adoption and implementation of shariah among other things, the reintroduction of the so called "Jakarta Charter" to the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution. The third tendency is the proliferation of Muslim groups considered by many as radicals, such

as the Lashkar Jihad (Jihad Troop), the Front Pembela Islam (Islam Defenders Front), the Hizb al Tahrir (Party of Liberation) and the Angkatan Mujahidin Indonesia (The Jihad Fighter Group of Indonesia).

After economic crisis of 1997, revivalism of Islam gained momentum, and fringe elements came to the fore and demonstrated their capacity to create problems. However, their appeal was not likely to last long. The majority of the Indonesians are Muslims and there is nothing in the political system which may be regarded anti-Muslim. All the mosques and madrasahs are funded by the central government. It is a Muslim dominated sovereign country, where adversarial decisions against Muslims in rule making, rule application and rule adjudication can never be envisaged. Yet radical Muslim groups were and still are unhappy that Islam and Shariat rules are not properly placed in the constitution. They do not trust the parliamentary forum for redressal of their grievances. They intend to declare Islam as the state religion and evolve a system on West Asian Islamic model. However, major political parties of Indonesia have rejected the resolution to adopt Shariah. They advocate the policy of unity in diversity (Bhineka Tunggal

Ekka) for unity of the nation and recognize the existence of five religions namely, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Protestantism and Catholicism. The preamble of the constitution merely indicates that "belief in one god almighty" is the paramount ideal and hence religious freedom and equal opportunity were provided to all the religious groups in the country. Indeed, the very idea of transforming Indonesia into an Islamic state could bring the future of democracy and pluralism in Indonesia into question. However, despite the recent tendency to cling more closely to political and formal Islam, it remains difficult to imagine that Indonesia could ever be transformed into an Islamic state.

Indonesia is moving towards becoming a fully democratic state. Democracy has given people freedom to ventilate their feelings. Indonesia has seen three truly democratic elections since 1999, including the country's first direct presidential election in 2004. This was the second election in which Indonesians elected their President and Vice President directly. As per the Presidential Election Law, 2008 the candidates must be nominated by a party or coalition that won at least 25 per cent of the popular vote or 112 (20 per cent) of 560 seats of the People's Representative Council &

132 seats in legislative election in order to nominate candidates for president and vice president. In all there are 692 seats in the People's Consultative Assembly.

Legislative elections were held in Indonesia on 9 April 2009, for 132 seats of the Regional Representative Council (DPD) and 560 seats of the People's Representative Council (DPR). A total of 38 parties met the requirements to be allowed to participate in the national elections, with further six parties contesting in Aceh only. The Democratic Party of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won the largest share of the votes, followed by the Golkar Party and the Indonesian Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party was the only party to have achieved 25 per cent of the popular vote, which is required to nominate its own candidates for president and vice president in the July election. It won 150 seats in the People's Representative Council, well over the 112 needed to nominate a candidate. In Indonesia, surprisingly, election results indicated a drop in votes for Islamic parties compared to 2004; they collected a total of 38 percent of votes. The Prosperous Justice Party, considered to be the most conservative Islamist party,

gained less than one per cent of popular vote. Many voters shied away from Islamism after their experience with several local elections which had resulted in victories for Islamic parties. Once elected, these officials began experimenting with sharia, or Islamic law, prompting resistance among the local population. For example, among the bills the legislators proposed was the anti-pornography bill in 2006 to gain the favor of religious groups. The bill had a clause which meant that practicing yoga could be construed as a pornographic action, which was too vague and popular opinion went against it.

Secondly, several corruption charges were brought against officials representing Islamic parties, which had previously been considered clean compared to other political parties. That explained the trend of voting for secular parties. The Christianity-based Prosperous Peace Party received only 1.48 percent of votes, and Catholicism-based Indonesian Democratic Party of Devotion received 0.31 percent. A Survey done by National Commission on Human Rights, Indonesia reports that 25 to 40 per cent of eligible voters were not able to exercise their constitutional right to vote during the legislative

elections. However, in 2009 legislative elections, many Indonesian political parties refused to accept their defeat and have taken legal action against their political opponents.

Presidential elections were held in Indonesia on 8 July 2009. The elections returned a Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to power as president and Boediono as vice president for 2009–2014 period. Yudhoyono defeated Megawati Sukarnoputri with a huge 60 per cent vote in the first round itself unlike in 2004, when he had defeated an incumbent Megawati Sukarnoputri in a run-off election. Yudhoyono was in talks with Islamist parties in a bid to form a coalition controlling more than half the seats in parliament. Initially, the pair of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Boediono was referred to colloquially by the Indonesian media as SBY Berbudi. But campaign team had changed its name to SBY–Boediono due to concerns that the term berbudi was not as well known outside Java. The pair of Megawati Sukarnoputri and Prabowo Subianto is referred to colloquially by the Indonesian media as Mega–Pro. These two candidates belong to opposing ideological backgrounds. During official campaigning the presidential candidates tried their

best to go the extra mile to win the hearts of grassroots voters, striving to convince them that they truly knew the plight of the people.

Democracy is still in its infancy in Indonesia. However, with its emphasis on pluralism and human freedom, it is eminently suited to the genius of the people of Indonesia. However, it is an urgent necessity to educate the people, as well as politicians, if Indonesia wishes to become a “mature democracy”. The obligation to educate the people politically is not only the responsibility of the government and the mass media but is the duty of political parties and all people who are aware of the problems that Indonesia is confronted with today. The media is one of the most important pillars of democracy. The people’s opinions and mindset are shaped by the mass media. Therefore, in order to achieve a “mature democracy”, what we need is for the media to recognize its moral obligation to emphasize important issues, People’s trust in clean government is absolutely necessary, without it office holders may not be able to run the government. It is a task of tall order, but absolutely necessary for the good of the people and for the success of the governance and Democracy in Indonesia. ■