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## **INDONESIA, ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY: A Comparative Perspective with the Arab World**

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It has been argued that one of the most evident tendencies in the post-cold period towards the new millennium is the rapid growth of democracies due among others to globalization. There is a strong tendency that increasing number nation states is becoming democratic. Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world, is also included in the latest waves of democracy, following the monetary, economic, and political crises in late 1997 and early 1998.

Indonesia is now not only the third largest democracy—a vibrant one, but is also the largest Muslim nation in the world. The transition to and consolidation of democracy in Indonesia since the rise of people power in 1998 that forced President Soeharto to resign from his long-held reign, no doubt, have shown that democracy is having deeper roots in this country. This in the end makes democracy ‘the only game in town’. But there are of course challenges faced by Indonesia that are crucial not only for the consolidation and entrenchment of democracy, but also for the future of the country.

There is a tendency among Islamicists—used to be called ‘orientalists’—however, to dismiss Indonesian Islam in any discussion on Islam, including its compatibility with democracy. Indonesian Islam tends to be regarded as not being real Islam; the real Islam, in their assertion, is only Islam in the Arab areas or other parts of the Muslim world. It is true that geographically Indonesian Muslims live in an area that far away from Mecca and Medina where Islam first revealed and developed. But in terms of faith and practice, Indonesian Muslims are no less Islamic vis-à-vis

Muslims elsewhere. As I show later, Indonesian Islam, however, has some special distinction that provides fertile ground for democracy to take roots.

On the other hand, the ‘people revolution’ in the Arab world that is gaining momentum since January 2011 seems to revive hopes for the introduction of democracy to the area. The fall in disgrace of such regimes as Ben Ali in Tunisia and Husni Mubarak in Egypt is likely to bring democracy to these countries. But, people revolution is continuing to take place in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Bahrain and some other Arab countries. But in the last few months, democracy seems to experience a setback in Egypt, when the military deposed the first democratically elected President Mohammed Mursi. Now it seems that military returns to the Egyptian politics with the election of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi was elected as the new President of Egypt by more than 96 per cent out of the turn out of only 47 per cent of the voters. With this new development in Egypt, it remains to be seen whether all these rapid political changes would in the end be able to make democracy as also ‘the only game in town’ not only in Egypt, but also in the Arab world as a whole.

### **Democracy in the Arab World**

In retrospect, the tendency of towards peaceful transition to democracy so far has not largely happened in many other dominant or pre-dominant Muslim states in the Islamic world. Eventhough, there came ‘Arab Spring’ 2011, the future of democracy remains very gloomy if not hopeless in much of the Arab world.

Looking back, according to a series of reports published by the Freedom House in New York, there is no convincing evidence that democracy gain strongholds in much of the Muslim world. In one of reports, for instance, “Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap”, there is an apparent ‘democracy gap’ in the Islamic Arab World. The ‘democracy revolution’ since January 2011, has not changed this state of affairs of democracy in the region.

There had been so strong resistance to democratic change in the Arab world. Since the early 1970s, when the third major historical wave of democratization began, the Islamic world, and its Arabic core, in particular, had seen little significant evidence of improvements in political openness, respect for human rights, and transparency. The democracy gap between the Islamic world and the rest of the world is indeed dramatic. Of the 192 countries in the world today, 121 are electoral democracies; but in countries with Islamic majority, only 11 of 47 have democratically elected

governments, or 23 percent. In the non-Islamic world, there are 110 electoral democracies out of 145 states, or over 76 percent. This means, the report concludes, that a non-Islamic state is more than three times more likely to be democratic than an Islamic state.

The report, however, also mentions the ‘bright spots’ of democracy in pre-dominant and the least Arabicized Muslim countries such as Albania, Bangladesh, Djibouti, the Gambia, Indonesia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Turkey, and Iran. Despite its shaky foundation and development, democratic ferment is considerable in these countries. Out of the non-Arab, 11 of 31 countries are electoral democracies, while none of the 16 majority Arab countries has democratically elected governments. Among the majority Arab countries, one (Tunisia) has an authoritarian presidential system; two (Libya and Iraq) are one party dictatorship; four (Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Yemen) are states with a dominant ruling party that faces thwarted and severely circumscribed political opposition; and the nine remaining states are monarchies, and eight of them are Arabic.

In another UNDP’s report on freedom in the Arab world (2005), it is concluded that despite variations from country to country, freedom in the Arab world remain very poor. Worse still, freedom in Arab countries continued to be threatened by two kinds of power: that of undemocratic regimes, and that of tradition and tribalism, sometimes under the cover of religion (UNDP 2005:8-9).

The UNDP further reports that with a few exceptions—some of which are cosmetic—free presidential elections involving more than one candidate do not occur in Arab countries. In only three Arab countries (Algeria, Sudan, and Yemen), and in a fourth under occupation (Palestine), are presidents elected through direct elections with more than one candidate and with presidential term limits. Syria and Egypt depended on referendums where the president was nominated by the parliament, after which a national referendum is held.

At the legislative realm, totally or partially elected parliaments now exist in all Arab countries except Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. However, the right to political participation has often been little more than a ritual, representing a purely formal application of a constitutional entitlement. In most cases, elections have resulted in misrepresenting the will of the electorate and in low levels of representation for the opposition. Hence, the elections have not played their designated role as participatory tool for the peaceful alternation of power. These elections have generally reproduced the same ruling elites.

The nature of many states in the Arab world has led some to equate the modern Arab states as the ‘Black Hole’ states. In this kind of states the executive branch of governance resembles a ‘black hole’ which converts its surrounding social environment into a setting in which nothing moves and from which nothing escapes (UNDP 2005:15).

However, the ‘bright spots’ among Muslim countries—mentioned earlier—raises the hope for the development of democracy in the Muslim world. But one has to admit that the classic question about Islam and democracy—whether or not Islam, for instance, could play a more positive role in the new wave of democracy—remains a subject of heated discussion.

Despite the ‘democracy gap’ in many—if not most of—Muslim countries, the Freedom House report argues that recent history shows that Islam is not inherently incompatible with democratic values. Indeed if one takes into accounts the large Muslim populations of such countries as India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey, and the Islamic populations of North America and Western Europe, the majority of the world’s Muslims lives under democratically constituted governments.

It is important to point out that in the last few years—as indicated just now—some people also have begun for some years to talk about the ‘opening of democracy’ in a number of Muslim Middle Eastern countries, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Iraq. It is also important to make it clear that some Arab governments have begun to open ways to freedom and democracy only cautiously and selectively. Regardless of the reasons, these countries have introduced somewhat ‘window-dressing’ general elections. The elections in Egypt in 2005 for instance produced more seats in the parliament for the candidates who were affiliated with the still-banned al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun. While in Palestine, the elections brought the Hamas into power.

The victory of Hamas—at least in the perspective of many Western countries—complicated political problem for the Palestinian administration. Many Western countries refused to deal with the Hamas-led government; in fact some of them refuse to disburse their financial aid. In the meeting of five Indonesian *‘ulama’* and intellectual figures with the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on March 30, 2006, during his visit to Indonesia, I appealed to him to negotiate with the Hamas in the efforts to bring peace in the region. The reason is simple, Hamas was democratically elected by the Palestinian people, and the international powers had to respect that. The refusal and reluctance of Western powers to deal with the Islamist

government that have been democratically elected indicates what some people call as the ‘double-standard’ attitude of the West.

There has been a lot of discussion among democracy experts on the so-called ‘democracy trap’, meaning that if democracy opening continues taking place in predominant or dominant Muslim countries, then the Islamists will soon gain momentum and win the elections; and would use that power for their own political agenda. There are of course many factors that contribute to the possibility of ‘democracy trap’, including the un-conducive political, economic, social, and cultural conditions that in the end lead to the thinking the Islamists as an alternative political power.

Responding to this tendency Arab regimes introduced ‘the trap of the one-off election’. This phrase refers to a ploy used by the regimes to keep those apprehensive about the accession to power of the Islamist groups on their side. It is also cited to justify foreign interference to prop up authoritarian regimes. Essentially, it is contended that opening up the public sphere to all societal forces—among the most active of which is the Islamic movement—will end with these forces assuming power, followed by oppression, such that democratic competition becomes history after the one and only election (UNDP 2005:12).

But the regimes in the Arab world ranging from Ben Ali of Tunisia, Mubarak of Egypt to Khaddafi of Lybia in the end failed to maintain ‘the trap of the one-off election’. In fact they have been toppled by the people power. But once the democratic elections where held, the Islamists gained power; the Ennahda Party in Tunisia, and the Party of Liberation and Justice (*Hizb al-Hurriyah wa al-‘Adalah*, formed by al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), *Hizb al-Nur* in Egypt. The results of the elections showed the truth behind the ‘democracy trap’ mentioned above.

In the Egyptian case, the Islamists, had been occupied with the efforts to dominate power, have been opposed by the nationalists and secularists. Before long the military deposed the democratically President Mohamad Mursi that cleared the way for them to return to power.

Looking at the Arab experience, the seemingly incompatibility between Islam and democracy has a lot to with cultural factor rather than by Islam itself. Arab culture is basically a male-dominated culture that put loyalty to tribe and family give very little room for democracy to grow. Not least important, strong religious, social and political sectarianism make it very difficult for democracy to find a space.

## **Distinction of Indonesian Islam**

At the other edge of the Muslim world, Indonesian Islam, no doubt, since its early history in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century is basically a moderate and tolerant Islam. This is due not only to the peaceful penetration and spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, but also to social and cultural systems of the Indonesian people. Therefore, social, cultural, and political expression of Islam in Indonesia is quite distinctive if one compares with Islam somewhere else.

Despite its cultural, social, and political distinctions, Indonesian Islam is no less Islamic compares with Islam in other areas of the Muslim world. Indonesian Muslims subscribes to the very same fundamental beliefs of Islam as laid down by the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, which later were elaborated and formulated by authoritative and recognized '*ulama*' (Muslim religious scholars). Indonesian Muslims similarly practice Islamic rituals like Muslims in other areas. If there are some differences, they are only in small or even trivial matters (*furu`iyyah*), not in fundamental teachings of Islam.

Therefore, it is wrong to assume that Indonesian Islam is theologically, doctrinally, and ritually peripheral vis-à-vis Islam anywhere else. It is true that Indonesian Muslims live in a region far away from the places—precisely Mecca and Medina—where Islam was firstly revealed and developed. But that should not lead one to suppose that Indonesian Islam is a 'peripheral Islam', a kind of impure Islam, or 'bad Islam', and the like. This kind of assertion can no longer be maintained.

Indonesian Islam is very rich, not only in terms of its cultural and social expressions, but also in terms of institutions. Indonesian Islam has two mainstream big wings, the Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912), and NU (Nahdlatul Ulama, founded in 1926), which since their foundations have operated in what is often called as 'cultural Islam'—as opposed to 'political Islam'. They perfectly represent mainstream Islam in Indonesia. These organizations together with many other mainstream Muslim organizations throughout the country own thousands of educational institutions ranging from elementary *madrasahs* and schools to *pesantrens* and university. In addition, they operate hospitals and clinics, orphanages, people's credit banks (Bank Perkreditan Rakyat/BPR of Baitul Mal Wattamwil/BMT), cooperatives, NGOs, and many others.

Not least important role of these mainstream Muslim organizations is in the civic life and civic culture. In fact they are religious-based civil society organizations. They perfectly fit in with the definition of civil society organizations that is, independent from the state, self-regulating, and self-

financing, that work as mediating and bridging force between the state on the one hand and the society on the other. As civil society organizations, they work for the better ordering of society as a whole.

Politically speaking, Indonesia is clearly not an Islamic state; nor is Islam the official religion of the state. Despite the fact that 88.2 per cent of country's 238 million total population is Muslim, Indonesia is not an Islamic state, nor is Islam the official religion of the state. Rather, Indonesia is the Pancasila ('Five Pillars') state. The very first pillar of Pancasila is the belief in One Single God, which according to virtually all Muslim leaders is in conformity with the Islamic belief in *tawhid*, unity of God. That is also true with the other four pillars of Pancasila, that is, humanity, unity of Indonesia, democracy, and social justice. That is why Indonesia is neither a theocratic nor is a secular state.

That is the very reason why Pancasila as common platform of the plural Indonesia, has been accepted by mainstream and moderate Muslim organizations mentioned above since the early days of Indonesian independence that was declared on August 17, 1945. That is also one of the reasons why these Muslim organizations do not support the appeal and efforts of certain fringe groups among Muslim for the transformation of Indonesian state into an Islamic state, nor do they support the implementation of *shari'ah* (Islamic law) in the country.

There is no doubt that Muslims played a great role in the rise and decline of the Indonesian state. Likewise, Indonesia has also experienced the rise and decline of democracy. Since the time of independence on 17 August, 1945, Indonesian people have accepted democracy. And since then, one can observed various kinds of democracy implemented, even though what was implemented was far from real democracy, if not authoritarianism. When President Soekarno was in power, he implemented what he called 'Demokrasi Terpimpin' (Guided Democracy), which was only a guise of his autocratic rule. And when General Soeharto rose to power following the communist failed coup d'etat in 1965, he implemented what he called 'Demokrasi Pancasila' (Pancasila Democracy), which was no more than authoritarianism.

### **Indonesian Islam and Democracy**

It is only, after the fall of President Soeharto on May 21, 1998 following the monetary, economic, and political crises, Indonesia began to enter the so-called 'period of reforms' (*masa reformasi*). Beginning in this period Indonesia has been trying to implement a more genuine and authentic

democracy. President BJ Habibie, who replaced Soeharto, introduced liberalization of Indonesian political system, lifted the anti-subversion law, and introduced press freedom. Before long, President Habibie conducted competitive general elections of 1999 joined by 48 political parties. The subsequent elections—parliamentary and presidential—in 2004, 2009, and 2014 were largely peaceful.

The fair, free and peaceful elections have shown to the world that Indonesia—being the largest Muslim nation in the world—that Indonesian Islam is indeed compatible with democracy. But one should admit that Indonesian citizens have very little knowledge of and experience with real and genuine democracy. That is way in the early years of the Indonesian experience in democracy in the so-called period of reforms (*masa reformasi*) there is a lot of signs of the ‘breakdown’ of democracy; indeed what has happened was called as a kind of ‘demo-crazy’ since democracy seems to be understood by certain segments of Indonesian society as mass-demonstration that often ended on chaos and anarchy.

The success of Indonesia to hold general elections in peaceful way should silence the skeptics who wrongly believe that democracy can not have strong root in a dominant or pre-dominant Muslim country. The case is probably true in particular Muslim countries elsewhere, but that should not be taken into sweeping generalization. The Indonesian case shows that Islam is not inherently undemocratic or incompatible with democracy. In fact there is a lot of Islamic principles and teachings that compatible with democracy.

The seemingly incompatibility between Islam and democracy is a result of literal understanding of certain verses of the Qur’an, or of taking only certain aspect of Islam and ignoring other at the same time. In addition, the failure of democracy in many Muslim countries is due mainly to a number of internal and external factors that inhibit the growth of democracy; some of the most important inhibiting factors are, among others, weak economic condition, backwardness in education, lack of socio-cultural capital, weak civil society and, not least important, the support of Western powers towards undemocratic regimes in Muslim countries.

Furthermore, the Indonesian experience in democracy has shown the fallacy of the so-called ‘democratic trap’ theory which argues that the democratic opening in Muslim countries would result only in the rise to power of the Islamists, not to say Muslim fundamentalists. In line to this theory, certain regime, supported by certain Western countries, annulled the results of the election when the Islamists or Islamic parties would seem to



win the election. The classic example of the interference in democracy is the Algerian case in early 1990s; the West-supported regime annulled the election when the Islamic party FIS seemed to win the elections and was replaced by the Western-supported ruling regime.

This unexpected interference has in fact alienated the proponents of democracy in Muslim countries from democracy; the double-standard attitude of some Western countries has produced some disillusionment among Muslims who love to see democracy becomes the order of the day in their country. The democracy trap argument has proven wrong in Indonesian case. The Indonesian elections have in fact shown that Islamic parties or the Islamists have not been able to ride the waves of the democratic opening nor to create a 'democratic trap'.

### **Islam and Transformation of Indonesian Politics**

As far as Islam is concerned, the results of the 2004, 2009 and 2014 general elections in Indonesia indicated a number of interesting political developments, not only in the legislature elections, but also in the presidential ones. I would argue, Islam and Islamic issues—such as the possible implementation of *shari`ah* or Islamic law—did not become central and big issues throughout general elections. Indonesian people in general, in contrast, were concerned mostly with issues they face in real life, such continued economic hardship, rampant corruption, lack of law enforcement, increased insecurity, continued spread of narcotics and other forms of social ills.

The best example in this is Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS or Prosperous and Justice Party), the most Islamically-oriented conservative party that was able to substantially increase its gains in the 2004 election from less than two percent in the 1999 election to seven per cent. But the PKS was able only to increase its votes less than one per cent in the 2009 parliamentary elections, and decrease to seven percent in the 2014 . The party succeeded in getting and maintaining more voters not because they campaigned for the implementation of *shari'a* or the transformation of Indonesia into an Islamic state, but rather for the fight against corruption and creation of good governance. But, the party failed to maintain its 2009 voters in the elections of 2014 because of recent involvements its top leaders in corruption cases.

The first and second direct Presidential elections (in 2004, 2009 and also in 2014) have substantially transformed Indonesia politics. Some of the most important tendencies are; firstly, political parties have not been able

now to dictate their will on the members let alone the masses as a whole. There is a lot of indications that the Indonesian voters are now becoming more independent and more rational in their political and voting behavior; they cannot now be dictated by their party leaders or by their *kiyai*—religious leaders, now they decide it for themselves.

Secondly; general elections of 2004, 2009, and 2014 also show the continued decline of the so-called '*politik aliran*' theory. According to this theory—based on Clifford Geertz' divisions of '*santri*' (strict-practicing Muslims), '*abangan*' (nominal Muslims) and '*priyayi*' (aristocracy)—Indonesian politics was heavily divided along religious lines and traditional loyalties.

I would argue, sociological and religious changes that had been taking place since that last decade of Soeharto's rule have contributed to the rapid demise of the *politik aliran*. Indonesian politics, since the the reform era, has been characterized by less and less *politik aliran*. In contrast what has characterized Indonesian politics since then is 'interest politics' if not 'opportunistic politics'. The election of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono-Boediono in 2009 presidential elections again shows that religious line is no longer relevant. Though Yudhoyono has been called by some international media as a 'secular' person, he is known in Indonesia as a practicing Muslim; while Boediono on the other hand has long been known as an '*abangan*' Muslim.

The case is the same in the presidential election 2014. The two pairs of Presidential-Vice-Presidential candidates are supported by two coalition of political parties across the ideological divides: Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa are supported by Pancasila-based political parties such as Partai Gerindra, Partai Golkar and PAN and also by Islamic-based parties, PKS, PPP and PBB. On the other hand, Jokowi-Jusuf Kalla are the candidates of the Pancasila-based parties, PDIP, Partai Nasdem, PKB (NU-based), Partai Hanura and PKPI. Islamic-based and Muslim-based parties failed to propose their own candidate.

Thirdly; despite a series of bombings and tendencies of 'intolerance' in Indonesia in recent years, Indonesian Islam remains moderate and tolerant Islam. The bombings have in fact contributed to a more resolute and stronger attitude among Indonesian Muslims in general to confront radicalism; more and more Muslims abandon the defensive and apologetic attitude towards the ruthlessness of the perpetrators of the bombing. The belief among some people of the so-called 'conspiracy theory' has been decreasing. Virtually all Muslim leaders issued statements in strongest terms

ever to condemn the bombings.

Not least important is the support of civil society organizations—particularly moderate Muslim organizations—in the fight against terrorism.

One of the most important keys to address terrorism and intolerance in Indonesia is more stringent law enforcement; professionalism and credibility of the police in the investigation of the perpetrators of terrorism and intolerance is very crucial in addressing terrorism. With public support, the police are now in a better position to decisively act in the war against terrorism.

To me, democracy will work more smoothly when law enforcement agencies are able to enforce law and order, bringing all perpetrators of violence and terrorism into justice. When police are reluctant or indecisive, we can expect that more and more radical groups and terrorists take law into their own hands. That is why, in order for democracy to be ‘the only game in town’, the capacity of the state to enforce law and order should also be strengthened. When this can be achieved, we can be more optimistic on the future of democracy in the country; and with the same token we hope that democracy will be able to bring a sustainable welfare for the Indonesian people, particularly the poor, the weak, and the deprived.

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He has been international visiting fellow at the Azhar University, Cairo; Leiden University; Oxford University; University of Philippines; New York University; Columbia University; University of Melbourne, and many others. He regularly presented papers on various subjects at national and international conferences.

He has published 23 books; numerous chapters in internationally edited books; his English books are *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*, Crows Nest, Australia: Asian Studies Association of Australia and Allen & Unwin; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004; co-editor, *Sharia' and Politics in Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2005; *Indonesia, Islam and Democracy*, Jakarta & Singapore, ICIIP & Equinox, 2006; *Islam in the Indonesian World: An Account of Institutional Development*, Bandung: Mizan International, 2007; contributing editor, *Islam beyond Conflict: Indonesian Islam and Western Political Theory*, London: Ashgate, 2008; co-editor, *The Varieties of Religious Authority: Changes and Challenges in 20th Century Indonesian Islam*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2010; and editor, *Indonesia dalam Arus Sejarah: Jilid III, Kedatangan dan Peradaban Islam* (Indonesia in the Stream of History: Volume III, The Coming and Civilization of Islam), Jakarta: Ministry of Education and Culture & Ichtiar Baru-Van Hoeve, 2012.

He is also co-chair of United Kingdom-Indonesia Muslim Advisory Council, formed at the end of 2006 by British PM Tony Blair and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He has been regularly invited to meet top level foreign dignitaries who visited Indonesia, among others: President George W Bush (October 2003); US State Secretaries, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton; Prince Charles; Australian Prime Ministers John Howard, and Kevin Rudd; New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark; and Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende.

In conjunction with the commemoration of Indonesian independence (August 17, 1945), on August 15, 2005, he was awarded by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono the 'Bintang Maha Putra Utama' [lit, the Star of the Greatest Son of the Soil], the highest star for Indonesia civilian, for his outstanding contribution to development of moderate Islam in the country. Early that year, in conjunction with its

50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary, The Asia Foundation (TAF) also awarded him for his outstanding contribution to the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia. In August 2010 he was awarded Honorary CBE (Commander of the Order British Empire) by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth for his outstanding contribution to inter-faith and inter-civilisation dialogues; and in June 2014, it is announced by the Fukuoka Foundation that he is one of the three laureates of the prestigious Fukuoka Prize 2014.

In addition, he is also known as a leading public intellectual commenting on national/international in newspapers and TVs on various current issues ranging from religious, political, cultural and educational to international relations. He can be reached at: [azyumardiazra1@gmail.com](mailto:azyumardiazra1@gmail.com) and/or [azyumardiazra1@yahoo.com](mailto:azyumardiazra1@yahoo.com)