

## Islam and Democracy: Breaking Myths

“Real power does not hit hard, but straight to the point” is a popular Indonesian saying. Hitting straight to the point is the significance of Islam in Indonesian Politics. While Islam and democracy are said to be in a relationship fraught with problems as Islam, allegedly, does not allow secular law to be put above divine law. Unfortunately, there exists a fallacy of generalization that equates Islam to Arab culture. This identification of Arab culture to Islam has resulted in a misleading perspective that Muslim countries could not practice democracy and that no Muslims would live under a democratic regime. However, Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world and also the third largest democracy, after India and US. Clearly highlighting how Islam's pre-eminent role in the country's social and cultural sphere did not translate into political power. Indonesia does not have an Islamic system of governance, nor is it an Islamic theocracy.

With the violent repression of the Communist party in 1967-68 and the seizing of power by General Suharto, supporters of political Islam found themselves marginalized. Suharto kept religion away from the affairs of the state and exerted state control over Islam. Preachers had to be licensed and during the 1970s more than 90 percent of Islamic institutions were government-run. The Council of Islamic Ulama frequently made decisions that seemed to reflect the regime's wishes, rather than the teachings of the Quran. With the end of the Suharto rule in 1998 in the wake of country-wide protests, the founding of political parties was permitted overnight. During the political liberalization led by interim president Habibie, hundreds of political parties were founded, many with an Islamic or Islamist orientation. For the first time in decades many Muslim activists were allowed to exercise political influence. Paradoxically, the Islamic parties were unable to benefit from this Islamization trend in society as a whole. Deep doctrinal, geographic, socio-economic and ideological differences divided the parties, while Islam was a major force in Indonesian politics it was not the determining force.

One of the main reasons why Islam and democracy have entered into a joyous relationship in Indonesia is the fragmentation of Islamic authority in Indonesia. The absence of a unified Islamic center is partially rooted in the country's history. The diversity of Indonesian Islam is usually seen as a result of the way the Islamic conversion occurred in the country. Because there was no prevalent, overarching kingdom with centralized authority, the Islamization of the population was subject to various kinds of influences and accommodations with pre-Islamic beliefs and practices in the different parts of the country. And this resulted in weakening the influence of political Islam.

Moreover, individualization and commercialization of Indonesian Islam party politics in combination with low institutionalization of the party structures has had various repercussions. Election campaigns cluster around figures, not political entities. As candidates come and go from one election to another, so do parties hence, voters are floating between parties. This has made it increasingly difficult to mobilize voters based on programmatic platforms. Party platforms have become highly susceptible to outside influences due to the fact that many of the candidates have only loose links to the party on whose ticket they are running for political office. In such an environment it is very difficult for Islamic parties to push through certain ideological doctrines

Islam surfaced as an influential force through a series of waves in Indonesia, international trade, the establishment of various influential Muslim Sultanates, and social movements are a few examples. Present Indonesian Islam is also characterized by variety as each region experienced its own unique history, tainted by unique and separate influences. From the later 19th century onwards, Indonesia - as a whole - experienced a more general shared history because colonizers capped a national

framework on various regions. The first sources that inform us about indigenous people adhering to Islam originate from the early 13th century; perhaps indigenous kingdoms adopted the new faith because it entailed certain advantages in trade as the majority of traders were Muslim. The spread of Islam in Indonesia was not a quick process stemming from one origin or source but it happened with multiple waves, in relation to coherence with international developments in the Islamic world, a process that is still continuing.

One of the major dangers of democracy is the potential for tyranny by the majority. The risk that a certain groups may use their majority to promote their special interests at the expense of minorities. Many countries try to avoid this outcome by constitutional separation of religion from the state, so that the state is not viewed as promoting one religion over others. This was effectively carried out by framers of Indonesian constitution which simply that 'The state guarantees the freedom of all residents to embrace their own religion and to worship according to their own religion and beliefs'. And since no religion is officially acknowledged, Indonesia is certainly not a theocratic state. Further, the constitution confers religious rights on individuals, not on any religious community, so that the government has to deal with its citizens individually, not as religious groups.

In the wake of democratic consolidation, Islam in Indonesia has completed the journey of transition from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy. In the past, three general elections in Indonesia were consecutively won by secular parties, namely Indonesian Democratic Party, Golkar and Democratic Party. Despite Islam being followed by 85% of the population, Indonesian Muslims keep their preference to secular parties. This view held by Indonesian also counters the argument that Islam is not compatible with democracy. Most importantly, Indonesia's example makes it clear that political Islam in the form of parties based on Islamic values and goals does not automatically equate to radicalism, fanaticism or antidemocratic politics.