Political Islam and Democratic Change in Indonesia

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Abstract

In the late 1990s Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, transitioned to democracy amidst concerns over Islamist ascendancy. Yet, a decade later and Indonesia accommodates a diversity of Islamic political expression. The following article considers the clues to this accommodation. It examines the relationship between political Islam and democratisation and its possible future trajectory in Indonesia.

Keywords: Democratisation, Identity, Indonesia, Political Islam

In 1998, Indonesia's transition to democracy witnessed the burgeoning of political Islam, a trend that raised the uneasy spectre of Islamism. (Note 1) Despite this unease, in the ten years since the transition, the Islamist threat has proved to be largely unfounded. It, therefore, seems appropriate to examine how Indonesia developed such a broad range of Islamic political expression. In what follows, I argue that both the material and ideational factors in play during Indonesia's democratisation provide important clues to unravelling how this diverse accommodation was possible.

1. Historical Islamic identification

Islam's long established historical roots in Indonesia date back to the 14th century having arrived via trading merchants from Persia and India. In amalgamation with *adat* (traditional customs), it plays a significant role in many of the archipelago's diverse cultural identities. As such, Islam is notably diverse in its manner of expression and the depth of commitment across Indonesia. For instance, on Java, there is a distinct difference, in terms of religiosity, between two major Islamic strands. Nominal Javanese Muslims, *abangan*, identify with an indigenized syncretic *Agami Jawi* whilst stricter *santri* or *muslimin* practice *Agami Islam santri. Santri* also adopt traditionalist or modernist outlooks, the former is viewed as a more open and tolerant form of practice whilst the latter is seen as more puritan, closer in expression to Arabian orthodoxy. Outside Java, places like Aceh in Northern Sumatra and parts of the Moluccas and central Sulawesi observe strict Islamic practice. In fact, it would be fair to say that *khittah* (cultural-religious) identification across the archipelago is a key feature of the polity's language of self-understanding. (Note 2) Nearly ninety percent of the population carry an ID card (KTP) that identifies them as Muslim. (Note 4)

2. Nationalism, Islam and the Indonesian Republic

Having said this, throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods, an uneasy relationship formed between the modern Indonesian state and the polity's cultural-religious identification. Consequently, there is, on the one hand, historical acknowledgement of Islam but also a concomitant state-level containment of its political appeal (Hamayotsu 2002: 353-375). To elaborate, during the struggle for independence Islam developed three major political responses to and within the emerging national project. These were the traditionalist Sunni Islamic organisation, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU - Awakening of Ulama), the modernist Islamic political party, *Masjumi* (Council of Muslim Organisations) and the militant Islamist movements, *Darul Islam* (DI - Abode of Islam) and *Tentara Islam Indonesia* (TII - Indonesian Islamic Army). (Note 4) Yet, the new Republic under the secular nationalism of both Sukarno and Suharto frustrated the political ambitions of these organisations by imposing major restrictions on a politicised Islam. For instance, after 1949, Sukarno re-positioned the significance of Islam in the national-political project by dropping the *Jakarta Charter* from the constitution. (Note 5) This left many stricter Muslims, particularly from outside Java, with the sense that the finalised constitution marginalised Islam and reinforced central Javanese dominance of the new republic. As if to reinforce this perception, Sukarno's subsequent quashing of the PPRI (Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia) rebellion in 1959 led to the prohibition and collapse of *Masjumi.* Following the events of 1965, Suharto's *Orde Baru* (New Order) also went on to stymie political Islam's former influence by refusing *Masjumi* any sort of return. In fact, Suharto's overhaul of the electoral system in 1971 effectively de-Islamised Indonesia's state-level political structure. This allowed the New Order's Golkar to dominate the electoral system after Suharto had forced the

major Islamic organisations to come under the banner of one political party *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP - the United Development Party). In practical terms, PPP was the only vehicle through which NU and *Muhammadiyah* could gain political representation.

Yet, despite Suharto's attempt to subsume the polity's Islamic identification to the diktats of New Order corporatism, it remained only partially successful (Barton 2002: 1-15). In reality, this marginalisation of political Islam only precipitated greater civil society activity focusing on building a dynamic Islamic community based on education and social welfare. Rather than directly challenge for political power, reformists like Dawan Rahardjo, Djohan Effendi and Nurcholish Madjid viewed Islamic development through social organizations as their the new raison d'être championed the building of *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI - Association of Muslim Intellectuals). (Note 6)This appealed to a younger generation of well-educated urban middle-class Indonesians who were enjoying increased access to strategic positions within business, government service and academia.

By the 1990s, the formation of ICMI and *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI - Council of Indonesian Ulama) facilitated the launch of Islamic news media, *Republika* and *Ummat* along with the Muslim educational foundation, *Yayasan Abdi Bangsa.* This indirectly helped to restore Islamic issues onto the political agenda. Interestingly, keen to court Islamic support as a counter to growing pro-democracy sentiment and rumbling military dissent, Suharto even began to encourage such developments. Indeed, it was politically advantageous to tolerate Islamic political activism and promote pro-Islamic officers in the army (Kadir 1999: 22-24). Major figureheads within ICMI such as Amien Rais, Sri Bintang Pamungkas, Eggy Sudjanan, Din Syamsudin and Adi Sasono symbolized this growing Islamic political influence. From Suharto's perspective, the likes of ICMI countered organizations beyond his direct control such as *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama.* Although this shored up his friable authority, the strategy would eventually backfire in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis.

3. Democratic transition and political Islam

By 1998, pro-Islamic figures within ICMI, like Din Syamsudin who had been instrumental in bolstering the orthodox *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia* (DDII - Indonesian Council for Islamic Predication) and *Komite Indonesia Untuk Solidaritas dengan Dunia Islam* (KISDI - Indonesian Committee for Solidarity of the Islamic World) began questioning Suharto's authority. (Note 7)Subsequently, with Suharto's grip on power loosening in the face of economic meltdown and pressure for reformasi, orthodox factions in the 'green' military began shifting their support to DDII and KISDI. (Note 8)Given the turbulent political climate, the DDII/KISDI/Military alliance eventually abandoned Suharto, as they saw him as a liability to the interests of Islam.

Notwithstanding this alliance, Indonesians overriding sense of tolerance and the diversity of Islamic expression made the possibility of a united orthodox Islamist front distinctly remote. In fact, key figures in the reformasi struggle, the prominent Islamic leaders, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais and the likes of the late Nurcholish Madjid were instrumental in maintaining public support for democratic change. (Note 9)All three continually emphasised the compatibility of Islam with democracy. In the turmoil of 1998, this was a crucially important stance to take as many Muslim activists were on the front line of the rallies against Suharto's regime. By doing so, they effectively prevented calls for the creation of an Islamic state gaining any sort of credence.

4. Islamic political parties

Even with Suharto stepping aside, Wahid continued to remain wary of NU's political return, viewing this as potentially damaging to its social mission. He preferred to stress moderation and support for *Pancasila* as the way to promote Islam in the national interest. (Note 10) Eventually, however, pressure from NU's *Kyai* (religious leaders) persuaded Wahid to reconsider and go on to form *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB-National Awakening Party). Likewise, tensions between Wahid and his uncle, Yusuf Hasyim and brother, Salahuddin Wahid led them to the form *Partai Kebangkitan Ummat* (PKU - Muslim Nation Awakening Party). (Note 11)

By late 1998, the prospect of a single Islamic political voice was remote with forty out of the eighty political parties to varying degrees, Islamic (Kadir 1999: 21-44). Although this number decreased by election time in 1999, twenty Islamic parties remained eligible. Most significantly, *Muhammadiyah's* Amien Rais formed the populist *Partai Amanat Rakyat* (PAN - National Mandate Party) after unsuccessfully seeking alliance with, amongst others, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP - Unity and Development Party). Yusril Ihza Mahendra took up the leadership of *Partai Bulan Bintang* (PBB - Crescent and Star Party). Other parties with stricter Islamic agendas included, *Partai Keadilan* (PK - Justice Party), *Partai Ummat Islam* (PUI - Muslim Believers' Party), and *Partai Masjumi Baru* (PMB - New Masjumi Party). In addition, the orthodox Islamic movements, KISDI, DDII, *Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia* (KAMMI - United Action of Indonesian Muslim Students), and *the Asosiasi Partai-Partai Islam* (APPI - Association of Islamic Parties) formed strong links with PK and PBB. In fact, DDII and KISDI remained strategically supportive of BJ Habibie in an attempt to offset Muslim support for the secular-nationalist, Megawati Sukarnoputri and PDI-P. Similarly, MUI and *Kongres Umat Islam Indonesia* (KUII – Congress of the Indonesian Islamic Community) urged Muslims to vote for an Islamic party and intimated that the next Indonesian president and vice-president should be Muslim.

Evidently, expansion of the post-Suharto party-system introduced new political parties capable of appealing to major Muslim constituencies in particular PKB, PAN, PBB and PK. This re-emergence of political Islam provided much needed electoral competition for more established parties such as Golkar and PPP forcing them to adjust their electoral priorities to retain the endorsement of their pro-Islamic factions. Indeed, despite the wider popularity of Megawati Sukarnoputri's PDI-P, the election of the NU's leader Abdurrahman Wahid as the new president reflected the influence of increased Islamic politicisation. Having said this, the results of the 1999 election clearly indicated that Indonesians en masse favoured a democratic polity over an Islamic state. (Note 12)

Significantly, however, Hidayat Nur Wahid's *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS - the Prosperous Justice Party, formerly *Partai Keadilan*) style of Islamic orthodoxy went on to secure a significant increase in its vote from 1.5 percent to 7.4 percent come the 2004 elections. (Note 13)Yet, the most realistic explanation of PKS's electoral rise lies with a younger generation of urban Muslims who perceive it as a 'clean' Islamic party. In fact, much of the PKS success rested on an anti-corruption rather than a pro-Shari'a platform with it enjoying support in Jakarta and on university campuses.

5. Militant Islamist groups

Of more concern is that since the collapse of Suharto's regime in 1998, Indonesia has witnessed a proliferation of paramilitary wings associated with Islamist organisations. They include *Laskar Pembela Islam* (LPI - Defenders of Islam Militia); Laskar Jihad (LJ - Jihad Militia); *Laskar Mujahidin Indonesia* (Indonesian Mujahidin Militia) and *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI - Islamic Community). Many of these groups have roots in the Islamic militias of Indonesia's independence struggle but their current activities owes much to the tutelage of *hadrami* (Indonesians of Middle Eastern descent) who fought alongside the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. For instance, JI, who identify radical Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir as its spiritual Omar, has pan-Islamic ambitions to create *Darul Islam Nusantara* (Bandoro 2001: 333-337). Its activities are linked to *al-Qaeda* networks operating in Southeast Asia including the 2002 bombings on Bali and Sulawesi, the 2003 Jakarta Marriott Hotel bombing and the 2004 suicide bombings at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. By contrast, LPI and LJ both publicly deny any links with *al-Qaeda* and claim their focus is domestic issues (Hasan 2006). Suspicions persist, however, that both LPI's and LJ's involvement in internecine conflict enjoys indirect support from KISDI, DDII and sympathetic 'Green' factions in the armed forces (Roosa 2003: 10-11).

Given Indonesia's recent authoritarian past, dealing with the perceived threat from militants is a particularly difficult and sensitive political issue. There is a real danger of polarising the moderate Islamic majority or impinging on newly acquired freedoms that may resurrect the spectre of military repression. (Note 14) But despite the extreme threats posed by these groups, indications are that they will remain marginalised by mainstream society. Encouragingly, on 18 October 2002, parliament issued anti-terrorism Decree No.1 and No.2/2002 designed to give *Badan Intelijens Negara* (BIN -The National Intelligence Agency) greater capacity in identifying terrorist suspects. (Note 15)Moreover, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government is now actively cooperating with Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Australia to combat terrorism in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Evidently, the rearticulated character of Indonesia's post-authoritarian political space is complex. Islam has reasserted an influence on the grammar of politics with the number of Islamic parties more prevalent than at any time in the past. This is something that challenges both the appeal of established political elites and what is achievable in secular terms. Yet, whilst Islamist parties do exist, the majority of Islamic involvement in electoral politics remains very far from being associated with the institution of an Islamist state. The 2004 results suggest that the majority of Muslims are more interested in a democratic nation-state. This preference has much to do with the fact that Indonesian's share a strong sense of setting differences aside and working through problems, something forged by a common history of anti-colonial struggle, a shared national language (*bahasa Indonesia*) and state sponsored education. Consequently, moderation and pluralism remain the predominant electoral norms. (Note 16)This is not to deny the challenges of the present reality but simple dichotomies appear to ill suit. As Islamic orientated political players firmly establish themselves, there is no reason to assume that Islamic and secular versions of democracy are identical. With a mass audience accustomed to viewing politics through extant symbolic lenses, this represents an important part of Indonesia's democratic evolution. It will be interesting to see how Indonesia continues to adapt.

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Notes

Note 1. The contemporary phenomenon of political Islam, not to be confused with Islam as a religion, refers to an ideological interaction between politics and religion in the broadest sense. Islamism, on the other hand, is specifically concerned with the modern politicisation of Islamic cultural concepts and symbols in a highly orthodox manner for radical ends, i.e. the establishment of an Islamic state, or at least an Islamic polity characterised by observance of Shari 'a. Although often used inaccurately and interchangeably with Islamism, political Islam encompasses a considerably more complex plurality of expression in Indonesia

Note 2. One need only look at the size of Indonesia's two major socio-religious organizations to appreciate the influence of Islam in daily life. The traditionalist Sunni Islamic *Nahdlatul Ulama* boasts in the region of 30-35 million members whilst membership of the reformist *Muhammadiyah* (Followers of Muhammad) is approximately 29 million.

Note 3. Since 1965, not to profess a religion left you open to condemnation and persecution as a communist, therefore the majority of Indonesians profess a religious identity.

Note 4. In the immediate post-independence era, Masjumi was the prominent Islamic party in Indonesia and its leaders played major roles in the fledgling republic. Currently, Muhammadiyah most closely identifies with the Islamic legacy left by Masjumi. In contrast*, Darul Islam* and *Tentara Islam Indonesia* were revolutionary Islamic movements with similarities to the Islamic Brotherhood in Nasser's Egypt. They formed out of Islamic militias who opposed the Dutch in Java as part of the long anti-colonial struggle for independence. Between 1948 and 1963, after Sukarno banned DI and TII, they did fight for an Islamic State (NII - Negara Islam Indonesia*)* under the leadership of S.M. Kartosuwiryo, primarily in West Java, South Sulawesi and Aceh. Their forces peaked in 1957 with an army estimated to be 13,000 strong. In 1962, DI and TII were eventually defeated after the Indonesian armed forces captured and executed Kartosuwiryo.

Note 5. Article 29 of the pre-independence 1945 Constitution gave the state the right to control and regulate religious life in Indonesia. During the 1945 constitutional debates, Islamic groups proposed a briefly incorporated preamble known as the Jakarta Charter. The seven words of which are, '*with an obligation for Muslims to implement Islamic law'*.

Note 6. Their ideas on Islamic social and educational renewal emerged in close association with *Himpunan Mahasiswa* (HMI - Association of Muslim Students). Madjid's moderate and reformist views made him one of Indonesia's foremost Muslim intellectuals. Known as *Cak Nur* (informal Javanese for brother), he headed up *Paramadina*, a prominent education and research institution focused on social justice but passed away in August 2005 after a short illness.

Note 7. Although barred by Suharto from national politics, DDII and KISDI remained major promoters of orthodox Islamic values in Indonesia. They receive substantial funding from the Middle East with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait being major donors.

Note 8. Throughout the 1980s, tensions within the military caused factional splits with 'red and white' symbolizing the secular nationalist factions and 'green' a support for Islam.

Note 9. Reformasi refers to the democratic movement against Suharto's New Order and the overall project of political reconstruction.

Note 10. The Republic of Indonesia enshrined *Pancasila* in Article 29 Section 1 of the 1945 Constitution as the official national ideology to ensure national unity post-independence. Derived from the conflation of *panca* (five) and *sila* (principle), the ideology's five pillars are monotheism, humanitarianism, nationalism, consensus democracy and social justice.

Note 11. PKU's political platform is a mix of *Pancasila* and Islam and not very different in practical terms from PKB.

Note 12. The 1999 election results: *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia - Perjuangan* (PDI-P - Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle) 37.4%; Golkar 20.9%; PKB (National Awakening Party) 12.6%; PPP (Unity and Development Party) 10.7% and PAN (National Mandate Party) 7.13%; PBB (Crescent and Star Party) 1.8% and PK (Justice Party) 1.5%. Komisi Pemilihan Umun: http://tnp.kpu.go.id/tabulasi

Note 13. PKS increased its 2004 vote from 1.5 percent to 7.45 percent, Golkar 21.6%; PDI-P 18.5%; PKB 10.57%; PPP 8.15%; PD 7.45%; PKS 7.4% and PAN - 6.43%. Komisi Pemilihan Umun: http://tnp.kpu.go.id/tabulasi

Note 14. The notorious *UU Anti-Subversi 1963* (Anti-Subversion Laws) are still fresh in the memories of many Indonesians. The laws had no clear legal accountability and gave almost unlimited power to the Military who used them to suppress any form of dissent.

Note 15. See *Departemen Penerangan R.I.*-Department of Information Republic of Indonesia: http://www.qtzfdm.or.id/documents/laws.

Note 16. PKB, PPP and PAN along with the secular nationalist parties *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia - Perjuangan* (PDI-P - Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle) and Golkar all reflect this ethos.