

And Islamist Parties try to look less Islamist (part 2)

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Fear prevails in the lives of Indonesians for much too long. The reign of fear has affected both the state and ordinary people. Cognizant of its credential deficit in both Islam politics and democracy, successive governments felt compelled to demonstrate a sympathetic gesture to the Moslem communities, sometimes stronger than it actually believed.

Over-reacting in public to the broadcast of *Fitna* was probably considered safer than under-reacting. A spectacular display of sentimentalism to the popularity of the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, and the temptation to follow the pressure of banning Ahamdiyah can be understood within this framework. This appears logical, given the next elections have lurked in the corner.

To appreciate better the argument presented above, it is worth comparing the behaviors of the past and present governments with those of the former president Abdurrahman Wahid. With abundant Islam credentials in his hand, never at any instance did Wahid need to prove that he was pro-Islam. So much so that he could afford to demonstrate the opposite. Instead of calling for jihad against the enemies of Islam, Wahid did almost to the extreme opposite.

Flamboyantly he displayed some of the best possible favors a Moslem leader could do for minority groups in a Moslem-majority nation. Not only did he restore the Chinese ethnic minority's civil rights to celebrate the Chinese New Year, he even went as far as claiming to have some distant Chinese ancestry. In contradiction to the repressive rules and regulations from the *ancient regime*, Wahid supported inter-religious marriage. He offered a public apology to the victims of the 1965 killings and their families, as well as to the people of East Timor for violence the previous government had committed in the past.

Until last April my observation of Islamization was narrowly focused on its effect of Islamization on the secular state in Muslim-majority nation such as Indonesia and by extension Malaysia and Pakistan. But two recent and separate analyses have helped me see things in a broader perspective. The first comes from Iran-born Amir Taheri, and the second comes from India-born Sadanand Dhume. Both are well-traveled, and both have worked for years as journalists.

In his article "Why Islamists Don't Win Elections?" first published in *The Wall Street Journal*, Amir Taheri shows a long list of cases from many countries where

Islamization of political parties have consistently led to election defeats, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. His conclusion is unequivocal:

“So far, no Islamist party has won a majority of the popular vote in any of the Muslim countries where reasonably clean elections are held. Often, the Islamist share of the votes has declined. In Malaysia, the Islamists have never gone beyond 11% of the popular vote. In Indonesia, the various Islamist groups have never collected more than 17%. The Islamists’ share of the popular vote in Bangladesh declined from an all-time high of 11% in the 1980s to around 7% in the late 1990s. Even in once-Taliban dominated Afghanistan, Islamist groups, including former members of the Taliban, have managed to win only around 11% of the popular vote on the average. In the Middle East and Arab nations Islamists don’t fair much better.”

It was my understanding that in response to perceived threat from the opposition Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in the late 1970s the incumbent United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-dominated government took a facelift, trying to appear to be more Islamic than PAS. I used to believe this at least partly explains UMNO’s resilience. Successive governments in Indonesia had followed suit. But Taheri shows the last elections in Malaysia gives the opposite outcome. PAS won more seats (from 6 to 23), while UMNO suffered the most severe defeat since 1969. Why? According to Taheri, UMNO’s PM Badawi played “the Islamic card, while PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang went in the opposite direction.”

Similar trends can be observed in Indonesia. Since his electoral victory in 2004 President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) has become increasingly Islam-oriented. In contrast, the most overtly and strongest Islamist party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Prosperous Justice Party) has consistently gives away its Islamist look and agendas for more inclusive strategies and rhetoric. Two questions follow. Has Malaysia’s PAS taken the lesson from PKS? Why advisors to President SBY have not taken the lesson from Badawi’s defeat?

Sadanand Dhume is more pessimistic than Taheri or myself with the possible outcomes of the global Islamization. One country where Islamization has been the focus of Dhume’s examination is Indonesia. What has worried Dhume is not just the safety of one or two minority groups currently under attack. Rather, as he writes in an April column, “[w]hat kind of country does Indonesia want to be? Will it be, as its founding fathers envisioned, a land where people of all faiths live as equals, or one where non-Muslims and heterodox Muslims are effectively second-class citizens? Will it be a country that respects an individual’s right to worship as he pleases, or indeed not to worship at all, or one where such matters are determined by safari-suited officials and bearded clerics? Will it be ruled by the law or by the mob?”

At first, that sounds a very common concern among many moderate and liberal Indonesians for the past few years. Dhume has just published his first book, *My Friend the Fanatic*, a product of four years of travel in many parts of Indonesia and conversations with people of diverse backgrounds. The book’s title refers to an important figure in the Islamist circle who traveled with him and helped him open the doors to other Islamist leaders and supporters. In late May Dhume visited Sidney and Melbourne for a writer festival and a series of promotional activities of his book. In Melbourne I had the privilege of meeting him in private for several hours, and

exchanging emails before his arrival. I raised further questions to him as bluntly as I could about his views. His answers were no less blunt, but also enlightening.

At the risk of being rude, I asked him what precisely is “new” in his contribution to the ongoing debate on the matter. His response was firm and fresh: “My contribution stems from a skeptical view of religious belief that is extremely rare or non-existent in Indonesia. I don’t believe that we should tiptoe around our opposition to terrible ideas even if they cloak themselves in the legitimacy of religion. This starting point sets me apart from the liberal mainstream in Indonesia.”

Describing himself as a liberal and atheist, Dhume distanced himself from both the political left and right. To answer my question, he added: “[w]hat is lacking in Indonesia is the space to be openly skeptical of religion. Religious discourse is effectively a kind of protected discourse. Now while I admire groups like JIL [Liberal Islam Network] I also believe that you can't win the important arguments that need to be won with fundamentalists simply by trading interpretations of scripture.”

And here is his punch line that I like best: “Unless Indonesia can develop space, however limited, for a discourse that is irreligious or even anti-religious liberals will continue to lose ground to Islamists. A Spanish Catholic who believes in gay rights or contraception does not require Biblical knowledge or papal legitimacy to make his arguments. In Indonesia liberals tend to hide behind the likes of Gus Dur who combine a liberal sensibility with spiritual authority. But what happens after him? Challenging illiberal interpretations of Islam is, of course, necessary. Unfortunately it is not sufficient.”

Incidentally, the above remarks came to me only days before Religious Affairs Minister Muhammad Maftuh Basyuni made a public statement that seems to vindicate Dhume’s point. The Minister was reported as calling on non-Muslim “to stay out” of the debate over Jemaah Ahmadiyah (*The Jakarta Post* May 28, 2008). One wonders why outsiders like the state, including its ministry, should not “stay out” of the issue if indeed the matter is an internal matter of a religious community.

In my view, the situation that both Taheri and Dhume perceptively analyzed has been made possible by the systematic annihilation of the left in Indonesia since 1965. The absence of the intellectual left has also been significantly responsible for the lack of irreligious criticism of religious orthodoxy and other violent-inclined vigilantes in the name of a religion. Indonesians remain unprepared to deal and reconcile with that dark past. The past killings and its aftermath continue to normalize state-sponsored violence, vigilantes, abuse of the already corrupted of law and justice, and the rule by fear.