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Islamist parties try to be less Islamist

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Fear has prevailed 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 Islamic politics and democracy, successive governments have felt compelled to demonstrate sympathetic gesture to the Muslim communities, sometimes stronger than actually believed.

To appreciate better the argument presented above, it is worth comparing the behaviors of the past and present governments with those of former president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid. With abundant Islam credentials in hand, never at any time 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 the extreme opposite.

Flamboyantly he displayed some of the best possible favors a Muslim leader could do for minority groups in a Muslim-majority nation. Not only did he restore the ethnic Chinese's civil right 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 old 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.

Until last April, my observation of Islamization was narrowly focused on its effect 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 offers a long list of cases from many countries where the Islamization of political parties has 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 percent of the popular vote," Taheri wrote.

"In Indonesia, the various Islamist groups have never collected more than 17 percent. The Islamists' share of the popular vote in Bangladesh declined from an all-time high of 11 percent in the 1980s to around 7 percent 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 percent of the popular vote on the average. In the Middle East and Arab nations Islamists don't fair much better," he wrote.

It was my understanding that in response to perceived threats from the opposition Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in the late 1970s, the incumbent United Malays National Organization (UMNO)-dominated government underwent a face-lift, 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 followed suit. But Taheri shows the last elections in Malaysia gave 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 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, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), has consistently traded in its Islamist look and agenda for more inclusive strategies and rhetoric. Two questions follow. Has Malaysia's PAS taken the lesson from the PKS? And why have President SBY's advisers not taken the lesson from Badawi's defeat?

Sadanand Dhume is more pessimistic than Taheri or myself about the possible outcomes of 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 a column in the *Journal*, "(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 Islamist circles who traveled with him and helped him open the doors to other Islamist leaders and supporters.

In late May, Dhume visited Sydney and Melbourne for a writer's festival and a series of promotional activities for his book.

At the risk of being rude, I asked him what precisely is "new" in his contribution to the ongoing debate over this 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."

The situation that both Taheri and Dhume perceptively analyzed has been made possible by the

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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.

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