

WebMemo



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Playing with Fire in Indonesia

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Indonesia is an extraordinarily resilient society. Its tolerant culture, religious traditions, and diversity cannot be easily subverted. Ample proof resides in what has proven a successful, centuries-long struggle with Islamism and its precursors—a triumph enshrined today in Indonesia's 10-year-old democracy. But Indonesia's democracy is more than a shrine. It is the battlefield in a continuing struggle of ideas.

Success sometimes breeds complacency. This can be said of Indonesia as much as anywhere else in the world. It was certainly the case in Indonesia's approach to international terrorism before the wake-up call of the first Bali bombing. With interesting applicability to current politics, overconfidence was an important catalyst in the turmoil that culminated in dictatorship and the slaughter of the 1960s.

It could also be argued that Suharto's misplaced confidence in his ability to manage the nascent Islamist forces of his own era tilled the soil for radical movements just now coming to maturity. As members of Indonesia's current political elite wrestle with those movements—and with one another for the spoils of leadership—an outside observer and friend could be forgiven for fearing that complacency is back as the biggest threat to Indonesia's future.

Islamism's Electoral Momentum. The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) is Indonesia's version of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is focused, like no other party, on the battle of ideas. And it is on a roll. In the 2004 national elections, it won 45 out of 550 seats in the Indonesian lower house (DPR), captured the speakership of the joint assembly (MPR), and joined the government with three cabinet seats. At the local

level, largely out of the national and international spotlight, it has won 88 out of 149 elections.¹

This past August, the PKS candidate came within a hair of winning the governorship of Jakarta. Only a united opposition kept him from power. Then, in mid-April of this year, with the opposition divided and a minority of the vote, the PKS candidate for Governor of West Java emerged victorious. In an election three days later for Governor of North Sumatra, with the opposition once again divided, the PKS won another key race.

Java is the world's most densely populated island. The province of West Java alone has a population of 40 million people—more than Malaysia, more than Australia, more than Taiwan. It is also home to “suburban” Jakarta. The province of North Sumatra is home to Indonesia's third-largest city, Medan, and a diverse population of more than 11 million. Together, these two provinces alone constitute 20 percent of Indonesia's roughly 240 million people. These are no small victories, and there are more provincial and local contests to come this year—more than one hundred of them—before two years of politics culminates in elections for parliament and president in 2009.

Politics Loves a Winner. The PKS's success recently prompted Golkar's leader in Indonesia's

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parliament (DPR) to float a trial balloon. (Golkar is the largest party in the DPR.) Of the four options that Golkar is studying for contesting the 2009 presidential election, Priyo Budisantoso said, one is a Golkar–PKS ticket.² This comes amid rumors that President Yudhoyono, himself long engaged in a low-key struggle with his Golkar Vice President, is also entertaining the idea of contesting the 2009 elections with a PKS running mate.

In fact, parties across the spectrum are flocking to the PKS banner. Among the first in line are parties in Riau, one of Indonesia's richest provinces, which is facing a gubernatorial election in August. The National Mandate Party (PAN), PKS's partner in the West Java election, is a possible partner there, but so too, according to press reports, are the United Development Party (PPP) and President Yudhoyono's Party.³

The PKS is in the midst of a very effective charm offensive. It presents itself to Indonesian voters as clean, effective, caring, and moral. And perhaps most important, it has backed off demands for establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law and instead appeals to support for "Islamic values."

For a growing number of Indonesians, this is a winning combination.

The PKS–Brotherhood Nexus. The critical question is whether this political posture represents a sincere transformation. Indonesian voters would be well advised by their leaders to examine the extremist roots of the PKS and the background of its leaders before drawing firm conclusions.

The PKS Web site describes itself as an Islamic missionary (da'wah) party that holds to the Brotherhood prescription of "Islam as the solution."⁴ It is a cadre-based party, in its organization similar to

communist parties. In an environment where it is often difficult to know what exactly parties stand for, the PKS is deeply ideological, with roots in the Islamist campus movement (Tarbiyah) of the 1970s that popularized the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and their intellectual founders, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb.

One commentator and critic of the PKS, Sadanand Dhume, describes the Brotherhood–PKS connections as follows:

Nur Wahid...holds a BA, MA and PhD from the Brotherhood-founded University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. Party Secretary General Anis Matta graduated from the Jakarta branch of Riyadh's Al-Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, also linked to the Brotherhood. The party has the blessing of today's most prominent Muslim Brother, the Egyptian-born cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who believes that democratic means can be used to pursue Islamist ends...[and] is quoted in the Justice Party's founding manifesto.⁵

That "founding manifesto" of the party (Justice Party) that went on to become the PKS also, according to Dhume, called explicitly for the creation of an Islamic caliphate.

Gambling with Indonesia's Future. The Indonesian political elite know who they are dealing with. They are simply gambling. They believe they can turn the PKS's success to their own advantage—whether ultimately to the good of the national interest or their own personal interests—while simultaneously containing their aims. One cannot help but imagine comparisons to Sukarno's effort 40 years ago to balance the advantages and influence of the communists. His manipulations ended in epic disaster for the country.

1. "Early wins in N. Sumatra, Java, buoy PKS," *The Jakarta Post*, April 18, 2008, at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/04/17/early-wins-n-sumatra-java-buoy-pks.html> (April 24, 2008).
2. "Golkar Siap Sandingkan Kalla-Hidayat dalam Pilpres," *Kompas*, April 17, 2008, at <http://www.kompas.com/index.php/read/xml/2008/04/17/16315950/golkar.siap.sandingkan.kalla-hidayat.dalam.pilpres> (April 18, 2008).
3. Rizal Harahap, "Riau parties woo PKS after victories in Java, Sumatra," *The Jakarta Post*, April 24, 2008, at <http://old.thejakartapost.com/yesterdaydetail.asp?fileid=20080423.G01> (April 24, 2008).
4. See <http://www.pk-sejahtera.org/2006/index.php?op=isi&id=110>.
5. Sadanand Dhume, "Indonesian Democracy's Enemy Within: Radical Islamic party threatens Indonesia with ballots more than bullets," *YaleGlobal Online*, December 1, 2005, at <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=6579> (April 17, 2008).

Rather than jockeying for partnership with the PKS, mainline politicians would be better advised to spend their time addressing the real grievances that fuel support for radical opposition: corruption, poor public services, poverty, and the perceived lack of real political choice. And the United States should do what it can to help, whether with resources, economic opportunity, or just honest advice.

Where Indonesia may be headed in the long term is of concern to the United States for many reasons. Americans are not opposed to a role for religion in the public square, as any perusal of American history will attest. There is no reason that faith and liberty cannot flourish together. This matters to Americans because, in a world that accepts this as truism, we are all safer and our rights are more secure. By the same token, we know that religious intolerance and government coercion on behalf of one particular set of religious beliefs are precursors of a wider tyranny and, ultimately, insecurity.

The United States also has a geopolitical interest. To the extent that the U.S. and Indonesia drift apart in their values, they will find it difficult to align interests in the broadest, most enlightened sense. Certainly, there is some tactical truth in the adage that the “enemy of my enemy is my friend.” But if we are to fall back to an exclusive, calculating real-

politik, how we define our “enemies” assumes paramount importance.

In some areas, this does not present a problem. The threat of a burgeoning Chinese presence in Asia, for instance, may become obvious enough that Indonesia and the U.S. ultimately join in countering it, whatever the politics in Jakarta.

But would an Indonesian government in which key players harbor the goal of achieving an Islamic state—and perhaps a global caliphate—share the American interest in countering extremism? The question answers itself. The global fight against terrorism is not just a fight against tactics. It is a war against an Islamist ideology that shelters terrorism. It can only be fought on both fronts. Ultimately, it cannot be co-opted.

Conclusion. Indonesia is not on the cusp of a sudden turn to extremism. Its wellspring of tolerance is deep, and there are a great many good people prepared to fight for its preservation. The real danger is that complacency and political opportunism will facilitate a slower-burning Islamist threat that is on them before they fully recognize its implications. Political posturing and maneuvering today could well end in disaster for Indonesia tomorrow.

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