

Islamist Parties in Southeast Asia: The Experience to Date

Robin Bush, Ph.D.

Deputy Country Representative, Indonesia
The Asia Foundation

Southeast Asia is an oft overlooked area of the world when it comes to debates on Islam and U.S. policy—yet in many ways it may offer to the rest of the Muslim world the best model of diversified, democratic, globally engaged Islam. Islam is experienced and practiced very differently in Southeast Asia than in the rest of the Muslim world—the gradual integration of Islam into a highly diversified cultural and ethnic landscape, the need for harmony among such varied peoples living closely together, and the geopolitical contingencies of an archipelagic context all mean that Islam has a different political valence in Southeast Asia than it does in the Middle East or South Asia.

That said, it would be a mistake to assume that the story of Islam in Southeast Asia is purely one of happy, harmonious, ‘Islam with a smiling face’ as it is often described. Complexity and nuance are the calling cards of most aspects of life in the region—and Islam is no exception. Some of the worst terrorist acts after 9/11 have taken place in Southeast Asia—which is home to Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, and a very bloody insurgency movement in southern Thailand.

It is that complexity, and the distinctions of Islam in Southeast Asia, that have eluded U.S. policymakers as they have sought to find an effective approach to the region. Immediately after 9/11, the U.S. response was to treat Islam monolithically, and to react with suspicion

towards all Muslims. So visa restrictions for Muslim applicants from Indonesia, and the requirement for all Muslim students in the U.S. to register with the Department of Homeland Security were two policies which particularly offended Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, a vibrant democracy, and a long-time friend and ally of the U.S.

Later, when U.S. policymakers realized that one of their most strategic allies in the ‘Global War on Terror’ was like-minded Muslim leaders, it was too late to take optimal advantage of what should have been a natural partner in this effort. Indonesians and Malaysians reacted at best with polite amusement to former Undersecretary of State Charlotte Beers’ public relations campaign aimed at showing the U.S. as home to happy, healthy Muslims. More problematically, in the years 2002-2005, when anti-American sentiment was at its peak in the region, any Muslim leaders promoting values of democracy, pluralism, or tolerance were discredited as being stooges of the west and of American foreign policy. This was particularly ironic as, partially due to reaction to the war on terror, indigenous Muslim democrats—precisely the kind of allies later U.S. public diplomacy policy sought to engage—were often delegitimized and rendered impotent.

Despite these setbacks, anti-U.S. sentiment in the region, as well as support for a hard-line Islamist agenda, is on the downturn. With the exception of the ongoing violence in southern

Thailand, terrorism is in retreat. Elections in Indonesia and Malaysia have served to moderate militant momentum. The U.S. has the opportunity now to engage in a productive way with this key region in the Muslim world.

This is a strategic time for re-evaluation and re-engagement in the region because, contrary to alarmist notions of pan-Islamism on the rise and terrorist activity in Southeast Asia propagated by some analysts and international observers, in the four main Muslim areas of Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, Mindanao (in the Philippines) and southern Thailand—a sense of crisis is receding and positive trending is visible. Islamic parties, and their role in governance, are an important part of this transformation.

Indonesia

Indonesia has one of the most stable political party systems in the region. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesians have held two national parliamentary elections, direct presidential elections, and are in the process of holding direct elections for chief executives in nearly 500 districts and provinces. While Islamist parties, forcibly suppressed during the authoritarian period (1965-1998), mushroomed immediately upon Suharto's fall—42 Islamic parties were formed within 2 months—they have not managed to consolidate popular support translating into electoral success.

The electoral record and polling data speak for themselves in terms of levels of support for an Islamist political agenda. Indonesian voters have been fairly consistent in their choices in national elections, and since 1999, the portion of the vote garnered by Islamist parties has never reached even the 25% level. In 1999 the Islamist vote was 16%, and in 2004 it rose slightly to 21% due to the gains made by the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) campaigning on a counter-corruption platform. After two years of direct local elections of mayors, governors, and district heads however, it appears that the electoral record is even more unsupportive of an

Islamist agenda. Overall to date, less than 10% of local elections have been won by candidates hailing from an Islamist party or a coalition of Islamist parties. The biggest winners thus far have been the candidates coming from a coalition of Islamic and Nationalist parties, at 37%, followed closely by candidates coming from Nationalist parties, at 32.6%.

Similarly, nationwide polling conducted by LSI (Indonesian Survey Institute) in late 2007 indicated that 57% of Indonesians self-identified with 'secular' political values, and only 33% with 'Islamist' political values. Further, only 8% said that, if elections were held then, they would support an Islamist political party.

A notable feature of the Indonesian political party landscape is the near absence of extremist parties opposing the democratic system or Pancasila—Indonesia's political ideology which enshrines religious freedom and tolerance. There are three main parties which hold an Islamist agenda—two of them PBB (Crescent and Star Party) and PPP (United Development Party), are holdovers from the New Order (Suharto regime, 1966-1998), and unlikely to garner strong wins in the upcoming 2009 elections. PKS, the third major Islamist party, has more potential, and gained 7% of the vote in the 2004 elections. PKS was founded in mid 1998, strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and organizational principles. It is one of Indonesia's only cadre-based parties, and in earlier years espoused a strongly Islamist agenda. Over time, however, with savvy political calculations, the party leaders downplayed their sharia based platform and replaced it with an anti-corruption, pro-justice platform—effectively increasing their electoral support six-fold in the 2004 elections. Since then, PKS has had a varied record in the direct local elections—winning by some counts up to 50% of the elections they have competed for, but with some poor performance and corruption issues marring their highly-disciplined, anti-corruption platform.

Malaysia

As in Indonesia, gains made by the main Islamist party competing in the most recent elections have been as a result of a toning down of Islamist rhetoric, and alliance building with other opposition parties. The Islamist Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) gained 23 parliamentary seats in the March 8 national elections (in 2004 they won only 7), and in coalition with two other opposition parties, took control of 5 of the 13 states, and upset the ruling National Front's two-thirds majority in parliament.

This electoral success has been vindication for those within PAS who have been pushing the party for the last few years to moderate its stance on sharia, to recruit more non-Muslim representatives, and to modernize its platform. PAS had previously been well known for its efforts to implement hudud law (criminal law—the cutting off of hands for thievery and the like) in the two states that it controlled—Terengganu and Kelantan. The Malaysian government's extraordinary (and authoritarian) response to 9/11 and the U.S. war on terror effectively sidelined Islamist movements, including PAS, and made it safer politically for Islamic leaders to affiliate themselves with the ruling UMNO party. In the 2004 elections therefore PAS suffered heavy defeats, after which it began an internal process of reinventing itself as a moderate and modern party.

Now, for the first time since independence, the opposition coalition (Pakatan Rakyat, PR) has a chance of unseating the National Front. Much will depend on the strategy taken by PAS on the issue of its Islamist platform. Some PAS leaders have called for sharia implementation and Islamization measures to be taken in Selangor and the other states newly controlled by the PR. Other coalition members—which include a Chinese-based party and the multi-ethnic People's Justice Party, have taken exception to this.

Meanwhile, Islam admittedly plays an important role in the governance of Malaysia—where

Islam is given special status in the constitution, and where political parties compete to be seen as more Islamic. State institutions often use Islam as a vehicle for control and regulation—though the trending, again, is a loosening of those regulations. For example, a Malaysian religious court in Penang ruled in April that a woman could convert from Islam to Buddhism, her original religion. This was seen as a landmark case that would pave the way for increasing religious freedom in the country.

Philippines/Mindanao

The Philippines in general and Mindanao in particular suffer from extremely weak and factionalized political parties, which makes electoral politics unstable and less than effective. The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was created in 1989, and is comprised of six provinces and two cities, and almost 5 percent of the population. Since 1996 the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) has controlled the ARMM, but has opted not to become a political party. The MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) also has not become a political party—so the two main groups claiming to represent the Muslim voice in the Philippines do not operate as political parties.

There are currently five Muslim political parties registered in the ARMM—two of which are inactive. There are also several sectoral groups or 'party lists' that compete in the national parliamentary elections—in 2007, only one of these won a seat in the national parliament. The weakness of the political parties in the ARMM results in governance being not only unstable but also dominated by clans, strongmen, and money politics. This has inhibited peace-building, the resolution of rivalries between the MILF and MNLF, and any real autonomy for Muslim Mindanao.

The terrorist activities of the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah in Mindanao in the last two years have been relatively effectively countered by the U.S.-backed Philippine military—though

the prolonged violence and suffering of vast swaths of the Muslim Mindanao population as a result may be increasing support for an Islamist agenda. However, there is little evidence that a truly Islamist/extremist agenda is supported, either through electoral politics or through anti-democratic means.

Southern Thailand

For the past few years, Thailand has been beset by political upheaval in opposition to the regime of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra—which ultimately resulted in a military coup in September 2006 followed by a constitutional referendum in August 2007. In addition, since 2004, Thailand has been experiencing insurgency in the five southernmost provinces, which has resulted in over 2,000 deaths. Five percent of the Thai population is Muslim, though Muslims make up over 70% of the population in Southern Thailand.

Prior to 2004, the Muslim vote was primarily channeled through a mechanism called the ‘Wahdah’, which was an interparty faction dominated by the Democrat Party, most famously represented by Surin Pitsuwan, who was Foreign Minister from 1992-2001. When Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai party took power in 2001, Bangkok tried to reassert control over the ‘Muslim south’, with outbreaks of violence beginning in response in 2003.

The conflict in the South is multidimensional, but is largely wrapped up with issues of identity—particularly the identity of the Malay Muslims and relations of power vis-à-vis Bangkok. Many analysts find that it is in fact state driven and perpetuated, in the sense that the central state did not allow room for a Malay Muslim identity, instead enforcing a heterogeneous ‘Thai Muslim’ identity. The framing of the conflict as a religious conflict is misleading, and has resulted in some unfortunate consequences including the engagement of the international community. Long-term analysts of

Southern Thailand agree that the conflict is not one of pan-Islamism or international terrorist networks—and that framing it as such mobilizes the international Muslim community in unhelpful ways.

U.S. policy in the region has been heretofore primarily one of very low-profile engagement, at least in public; this is widely seen as effective. There are conspiracy theories circulating in the South that the U.S. has engineered the violence in order to justify military engagement; as a result, the U.S. has wisely been restrained in its presence and involvement in the conflict.

Policy Implications for the U.S.

Across the board in Southeast Asia when Islamist and political Islam groups are marginalized or disenfranchised, they have tended to radicalize, resulting in episodes of violence. Some scholars have argued compellingly that this should not be interpreted as increasing radicalization or extremism on the part of the societies as a whole—but rather as the reverse, increasing weakness on the part of radical groups resulting in violence. This, and other norms from the Southeast Asian experience, presents a set of policy implications for the U.S.:

- While recognizing the diversity of expression and interpretation within Islam, the U.S. should not attempt to favor or strengthen particular ‘elements’ within Islam; U.S. government policy towards Muslims or the Muslim world should be devoid of theological or interpretational bias.
- Recognition that extremism, even in the name of religion, is not always about religion should engender policy-making related to more direct causal issues—economics, class, political enfranchisement, etc.
- Political party training and support across the board can be effective—if both Islamic and non-Islamic parties are more disci-

plined and provide efficacious vehicles for political participation, radicalization and violence is likely to lose appeal.

- Support for democracy is important, however in many areas of Southeast Asia 'democracy discourse' has been discredited; as a result it will be more effective to support substantive elements of democracy—rule of law, anti-corruption, women's political participation, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, etc.