The politics of Islam in South-east Asia

Indonesia’s general elections on 29 May 1997 resulted in a predictable victory for the government-backed Golkar party. Less expected was the 23% of the vote won by the Islamic Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) – the United Development Party – and the virtual elimination of the only other political party, the secular Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) which acquired less than 3% of the vote. The large swing in favour of the PPP underscores the re-emergence of Islam as an important political influence, and as the main source of opposition to Indonesian President Suharto’s regime. In a free and fair election, as opposed to Indonesia’s highly-managed political system, the PPP could conservatively hope to double its vote.

Galvanising Islamic sentiment

In South-east Asian countries – such as Indonesia and Malaysia – where Muslims constitute the majority, rapid social and economic change over recent decades has galvanised Islamic sentiment. The rise of charismatic Muslim political figures has helped bring this largely latent sentiment to the surface.

This feeling is most acutely expressed in Indonesia, where renewed activism was sparked off by Suharto’s 1990 decision to sanction an Islamic umbrella group – the Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia (ICMI) – in an attempt to channel and control the emergence of Islamic political currents. The move mobilised Muslim students and intellectuals after almost two decades in which the association between Islam and politics has been considered taboo by the country’s founding fathers, who refused to consider defining Indonesia’s plural society as an Islamic state.

In neither case has the entry of Islam into mainstream politics generated fundamentalist tendencies, although these do exist on the fringes. As elsewhere, Islamic ideals have succeeded socialism as the ideology of choice for those wishing to create a more equitable, moral society. Political Islam is thus a potential force for democracy in the region. But, if badly managed, it could also lead to social friction given the delicate religious and ethnic balance, and the existence of sizeable Chinese, Christian and Hindu minorities, in both countries.

Socio-economic motivation

The socio-economic context of mainstream Islamic activism is crucial to understanding the basic motivation of South-east Asia’s Muslim politicians. Rigid orthodoxy and dogma are largely avoided in favour of applying Islamic principles to the pursuit of social justice, democracy and moral reform – Anwar Ibrahim describes these as the ‘societal ideals of Islam’. Pockets of orthodox and devout Islam tend to be geographically isolated, for example in the Malaysian state of Kelantan and in the Indonesian province of Aceh in northern Sumatra, both of which have caused considerable problems for Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

Mainstream Muslim politicians are aware that fanaticism and militancy are latent forces in a plural society like Malaysia. Recent outbreaks of ethnic violence in Indonesia testify to the difficulties secular governments face in managing Islamic sentiment. Sixty people have died in approximately 30 incidents of unrest, mainly in small towns in central and eastern Java since January 1996. The challenge for Islamic politicians is to channel religious faith as a political force down a modern, liberal and constructive path.

Political activity in Indonesia

The resurgence of Islamic political activity in Indonesia is remarkable given the traditional suspicion of the ruling elites towards it. The Army particularly bears a grudge against radical Islam because it was forced to quash fundamentalist rebellions in the 1950s, shortly after winning independence from the Dutch. Activists in certain regions felt betrayed by the country’s founding fathers, who refused to consider defining Indonesia’s plural society as an Islamic state.

Subsequently, Muslim organisations like the rural Nahdatul Ulama – which claims to have up to 35 million members – and the more urban Muhammadiya played a tangential political role in the early years of Suharto’s ‘New Order’. Without their support the Army could not have come to power in 1966. After 1970, however, the military effectively removed Islam from the political sphere.

Kelantan’s Islamic state administration

In Kelantan – bordering Thailand on Malaysia’s east coast – the ruling UMNO was defeated in 1990 by the Islamic Party bringing an avowedly Islamic state administration to power. The federal government, under UMNO control, has threatened to stop aid and investment in the state. Kelantan’s charismatic chief minister, Nik Aziz, has pressed forward with plans to enforce aspects of Sharia law. However, the conflict between Kuala Lumpur and Kelantan is mostly driven by insular concerns, centred on the importance given to Kelantanese figures in the ruling hierarchy – Kelantan’s Prime Minister Masathir Mohamed comes from the west coast state of Kedah.

The fact that parochial ethnic politics and not Islamic fundamentalism underlies Kelantan’s Islamic identity is highlighted by the absence of concerted support for Islamic activists operating in southern Thailand. Despite Bangkok’s suspicions, activists struggling for a separate state in the four Muslim provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Satun and Yala, obtain only tea and sympathy from across the Malaysian border.
This period helped to formulate the contemporary outlook of many prominent intellectuals. Islamic thinkers like Amien Rais and Nurcholis Madjid focused on the social and economic needs of the Ummat (the Muslim community).

In its most moderate form, Islamic discourse argues that Muslims should be given a more equitable share of the economy. In a country where the small Chinese business elite and the better-educated, middle-class Christians are perceived to dominate the economy, this was a popular message.

Indonesia is ripe for the politics of populism. After 3 years in power, Suharto is widely perceived as being out of touch with reality; allowing his business friends to dominate profitable sections of the economy and giving members of his immediate family the most lucrative elements. Islam’s inherent populism appeals to those who feel that Suharto’s ‘New Order’ has become too feudal and nepotistic.

There has also been a remarkable reassertion of Islamic identity in urban society, first in Malaysia and then in Indonesia. This appears to be a product of social stress caused by rapid urbanisation and economic growth. In a harsher, more competitive society, where family support and ethnic identity is weakened, Indonesian Muslims have turned to the mosque for support.

These parallel trends have created a natural constituency for Islamic politics – as well as the potential for unrest. Ironically, this was precisely what Suharto was seeking to avoid when he created the ICMI. Recognising the growth of opposition, the President sought to co-opt the Islamic community by projecting a more devout Islamic image himself and offering protesters a political platform. He was also looking for alternative political support to his traditional military base.

Suharto may have succeeded in outwitting the armed forces, but Muslim activists have taken things further than he would like. The ICMI attracted younger supporters, many of whom either saw an outlet for political action, or sensed the opportunity to recreate a party similar to the Masjumi – that was banned in 1969 by Indonesian President Sukarno. Exploiting a lively Muslim press and the ICMI’s legitimacy, Amien Rais and former parliamentary member Sri Bintang Pamungkas launched attacks on corruption and demanded political change.

A series of riots has taken place over the past 18 months, mainly in Javanese towns, where Christian and Chinese property has been the target of Muslim anger. It is not clear, however, whether the stimulus for violence came from protesters, or was engineered by the military to demonstrate the dangers of Islamic politics. Given Indonesian realities, a mixture of both is likely.

Characteristically, Suharto has acted to weaken the ICMI over the past six months. The political fortunes of Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, its chairman, diminished after it became apparent that he was unable to command widespread military support, and it is now unlikely that he will be appointed Vice-President in 1998. In mid-March, Suharto advised Habibie to remove Amien Rais from the ICMI’s board. At the same time, in an astute move, Suharto brought about a reconciliation with Nahdlatul Ulama leader Abdurrahman Wahid, who had refused to join the ICMI. Wahid’s type of Islamic politics is more secular and reflects concerns for the harmony of Indonesia’s pluralist society.

As a result, the ICMI’s legitimacy has been damaged, and Suharto has demonstrated that he dominates the political sphere. Nevertheless, as the May 1997 general election results illustrate, the PPP attracted much of the militant support previously associated with the nationalist PDI. In some areas, the PPP showed remarkable courage. For example, one of its branches in Madura – a large island off the east Java coast – successfully made the government order a new vote on 4 June – an unprecedented development in Indonesian politics. Even Golkar was forced to pursue the support of Muslim personalities and project a more Islamic image. The effect has been to reinforce the role of Islam in Indonesian politics still further.

Islam in Malaysia

A similar cycle of ascendancy and decline has characterised Anwar Ibrahim’s fortunes. Anwar – who was nominated Deputy President at UMNO’s November 1998 annual congress – immediately tried to establish a political platform that exploited his long association with Islamic activism and political thought. Drawing on didactic Islamic intellectual traditions, as well as religious ideas espoused, for example, by Sudanese Islamic leader Hassan Tourabi, Anwar began attracting support for a modern, progressive Islam to meet the challenges of contemporary society. Significantly, Anwar has close ties with Muslims in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

In Malaysia, however, he has attempted to consolidate power too fast; his high profile and dynamic image has alerted Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed to the threat of a possible leadership challenge. Many of Anwar’s followers have much stronger views on Islam than does the secular Mahathir.

At the 1996 UMNO congress, Anwar suffered a series of political setbacks when key aides were not elected to senior party positions. More recently, it has been rumoured that Mahathir will remove Anwar from the Finance Ministry, from where he commands a powerful political base. Although there is no suggestion that Mahathir is considering replacing him as his deputy, the appeal of Anwar’s ideas and his image as a dynamic Islamic politician have forced the Prime Minister to try and dilute his growing power. Although Mahathir left Anwar in charge while he went on a two-month extended overseas tour in May, most political observers believe that Anwar faces a test of loyalty rather than an opportunity to seize power.

 Held in check?

For now, it appears that the growing influence of Islamic politicians has been checked by the ruling regimes in Indonesia and Malaysia. But it may be too late to rule out their role in the forthcoming succession struggles. Both Mahathir and Suharto are now over 70 years of age and neither is in good health. Moreover, they have created the political environment in which Islam has come to the forefront and made it inevitable that successor regimes pay greater attention to it. Managing an enhanced political role for Islam in a period of transition without alienating minorities will be a formidable task.