



Is the Indonesian Transition a Model for the Arab Spring?

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Is the Indonesian Transition a Model for the Arab Spring?

Paul J. Carnegie

Introduction¹

Over the last two years, the ‘Indonesian model’ has become an increasingly repeated mantra in media and policy circles. It seems to hold the promise of a ‘road map’ for the nascent transitions taking place in the Arab world. I can see the logic and appeal here. Simply stated, Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country on the planet and in the decade and more since the downfall of Suharto; it has successfully, if not always without difficulty, transitioned from authoritarian rule to a functioning democracy. At the same time, initial concerns over Islamist ascendancy have proved largely unfounded. In fact, Indonesia accommodates a diversity of Islamic political expression within the framework of democratic electoral politics. Which explains the recent interest and raises the question what lessons, if any, can we draw from it?

I think the most important thing to say at this stage is that we need to proceed with caution before we hold up the ‘Indonesian model’ as a general panacea. There are some real differences between the transition that took place in Indonesia and the events unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Having said this, the following paper aims to render these political events, even at their most chaotic, slightly more intelligible and slightly less incoherent. It seeks to gain some analytical purchase on what is unfolding in the MENA region by drawing together what are hopefully some prudent comparative insights.

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Background on political Islam in Indonesia

Firstly, Indonesia's history, geography and demographic make-up have led to a plurality of Islamic expression across the archipelago. One need only look at the size of Indonesia's two major socio-religious organizations to appreciate the influence of Islam in daily life. The traditionalist Sunni Nahdlatul Ulama (NU -Awakening of Ulama) boasts about 30-35 million members whilst the reformist Muhammadiyah numbers approximately 29 million (Saleh 2001). Yet, a united Islamist front with a strongly orthodox agenda remains a distinctly remote possibility in Indonesia. This situation has a historical context.

The modern Indonesian state has not always had an easy relationship with the polity's cultural-religious identification. Historically, there has been acknowledgment of Islam but also a containment of its political appeal at state-level especially in the face of emergence of the post-independence *Pancasila* state. The nationalism and nation-state building projects of both Sukarno and Suharto imposed major restrictions on the former. Following the traumatic events of 1965 and the ascendancy of *Orde Baru* (New Order), Suharto was keen to stymie any challenges to his authority. This involved a major overhaul of the electoral system in 1971 that effectively de-Islamised Indonesia's state-level political structures. It ensured the electoral dominance of Golkar by forcing the major Islamic organisations to align under the banner of a regime co-opted political party, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP - the United Development Party).

Having said this, Suharto's attempts remained only partially successful in subsuming the polity's Islamic identification to the diktats of New Order corporatism. In reality, his marginalisation of political Islam precipitated greater civil society activity on its part. Rather than challenge directly for political power, reformists like Dawan Rahardjo, Djohan Effendi and Nurcholish Madjid focused on building a strong and dynamic Islamic community based on education and social welfare. By the 1990s, they had helped form *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI - Association of Muslim Intellectuals). Their ideas on Islamic social and educational renewal emerged in close association with *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam* (HMI – Islamic Students Association). Their work and that of the conservatively orthodox *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI – Indonesian Ulama Council), helped restore Islamic issues onto the political agenda especially with Suharto courting Islamic support as a counter to growing pro-democracy sentiment and rumbling military dissent. Major figureheads within ICMI such as Amien Rais, Sri Bintang

Pamungkas, Eggy Sudjanan, Din Syamsudin and Adi Sasono symbolised this growing Islamic political influence. Although this shored up Suharto's increasingly friable authority, the strategy eventually backfired in the wake of the devastating Asian Financial Crisis of 1997.

Given the aforementioned context, the prospect of a united Islamist front is remote in Indonesia. Yet, at the same time, it is fairly accurate to say that developments in the post-Suharto party system did introduce political players with stricter forms of Muslim identity politics capable of appealing to major Muslim constituencies. These include PKB (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* - National Awakening Party), PAN (*Partai Amanat Rakyat* - National Mandate Party), PBB (*Partai Bulan Bintang* - Crescent and Star Party) and PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* - Prosperous Justice Party formerly PK - *Partai Keadilan*). Similar to Malaysia, Islamic revivalism among sections of the Indonesian middle classes has no doubt helped bolster this appeal. The likes of Hidayat Nur Wahid's PKS and Yusril Izha Mahendra's PBB appeal mostly to sections of more conservative-minded, urban middle classes with an interest in promoting social decency, political moderation, and piety based on Islam as an ethical reference. The moral concerns of these constituencies combined with feelings of uncertainty toward social change in the face of rapid development no doubt helped bolster this appeal.

Yet, whilst the number of Islamic parties is more prevalent than at any time in Indonesia's past, most of their involvement is of a moderate kind and very far from being associated with the institution of an Islamist theocracy. Moreover, the results of the first democratic elections of the post-Suharto era in 1999 indicated clearly that Indonesians en masse favored a democratic polity over an Islamic state, giving the secularist-nationalist parties of the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle and the Golkar party 58.3 percent of the vote while the various Islamic parties amassed less than 42 percent.² True, the Islamist, PKS whose leaders claim it does not seek to impose Shari'a (despite links to the Muslim Brotherhood), increased its vote from 1.5 percent in

² See Komisi Pemilihan Umum, "Indonesian elections with figures and facts 1955-1999," General Elections

Commission, Jakarta, 2000. The 1999 election results: PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle) 37.4%; Golkar 20.9%; PKB (National Awakening Party) 12.6%; PPP (Unity and Development Party) 10.7% and PAN (National Mandate Party) 7.13%; PBB (Crescent and Star Party) 1.8% and PK (Justice Party) 1.5%.

1999 to 7.45 percent in 2004.³ Having said this, a large part of this success rested on its image as a relatively new and untainted party, as well as the stagnation and subsequent unraveling of Megawati's tenure. The PKS leadership skillfully exploited the situation to cast itself as a "clean" Islamic party committed to an anti-corruption platform, rather than to the imposition of Shari'a rule. Although the public's perception of it has tarnished somewhat over the years, especially recently with the investigations by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), it marginally increased its share in the People's Representative Council (the Indonesian version of the House of Representatives) in the 2009 elections to 7.88 percent.

Most significantly, the PKS and other Islamic-oriented groups represent only 169 out of 560 seats in parliament - a mere 30 percent. Even the PKS has struggled to consolidate a solid constituency base in the regions capable of undermining the predominance of *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*. The sweeping electoral triumph of the secular-nationalist Democratic Party (*Partai Demokrat* or PD) in 2009 with 148 seats alongside the more established Golkar and Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle groups (106 and 94 seats respectively) indicates that Islam does not necessarily trump other interests or issues in Indonesia. This is in some contrast to the much more united Islamist *Ennahda* in Tunisia or the Muslim Brotherhood linked Freedom and Justice Party (FJP - *Hizb Al-Hurriya Wal - 'Adala*) and Salafist *Al-Nour* in Egypt. The recent Islamist electoral successes *Ennahda* in Tunisia and the FJP and Salafist *Al-Nour* in Egypt suggest a different political dynamic than Indonesia. *Ennahda* and *Hizb Al-Hurriya Wal - 'Adala* are certainly more organised political blocs.

Moreover, given the context of the New Order era, some of the key figures in the *reformasi* struggle (the prominent Islamic leaders, Abdurrahman Wahid, Amien Rais and the late Nurcholish Madjid) played instrumental roles in maintaining public support for democratic change and urging restraint. Their links to Muslim activists on the front line of the student protests and rallies against Suharto allowed them to emphasize the compatibility of Islam with democracy, political rights and justice. These leading figures and their associated organisations

³ See Komisi Pemilihan Umum, (2004). "Results of vote count." General Elections Commission: Jakarta. PKS

increased its 2004 vote from 1.5 % to 7.45 % -- Golkar 21.6%; PDI-P 18.5%; PKB 10.57%; PPP 8.15%; PD 7.45%; and PAN - 6.43%.

also played major roles in the aftermath of the downfall by helping to disseminate democratic values throughout society via voter education and election monitoring. The underscoring of moderation and support for *Pancasila* was crucially important in the turmoil surrounding Suharto's downfall as it prevented calls for the creation of an Islamic state gaining any sort of credence. Appeals to Indonesians' sense of tolerance and national pride took precedence, something replicated in many of the initial uprisings of the Arab Spring. It remains to be seen whether Tunisia's *Ennahda* and Egypt's FJP and *Al-Nour* will do the same over the long term.

Lessons, if any?

I think the main thing the Indonesian experience highlights is that countries do not emerge in straightforward transitions from authoritarian rule to multi-party democracy overnight. Let us not fool ourselves the challenges of transition are multiple and difficult. It is all too easy to assume that when a country enters a transition from authoritarian rule it is inextricably moving towards democracy. This is a false assumption. The process is as susceptible to stall, breakdown or retreat back into what Marina Ottaway (2003: 3-19) has termed a 'semi-authoritarian condition'.

Success, if it can even be called that, depends on translating momentum for change into representational capacity with the ability to yield meaningful reform and improvements that can sustain over time. This involves addressing transitional justice, effective political reform and economic stabilisation while negotiating the pitfalls of complex local terrains -- not to mention popular legitimation, judicial reform, diffusing democratic values, marginalizing anti-system actors, ensuring greater civilian rule over the military, removal of reserved authoritarian domains, party-system development and the routinisation of politics (Schedler 1998: 91-107).

Indonesia has faced substantial challenges (and still does) but, at the same time, it has registered some significant achievements over the 13 years since its initial transition. To put it another way, there are no simple categorisations, rather matters of time and degree. The legacies of the past have certainly made democratic re-arrangement vis-à-vis political power a complicated affair. This helps us recognize that democratisation is not the same as democracy, it is a process and rarely, if ever, ideal. We have to remember that there is a distinction between the political system

(democracy) and the process of establishing that system (democratisation). Indonesia's transformation, in common with other democratizations, has been anything but easy. Nevertheless, what it does show us is that democracy can become the "only game in town" when change occurs incrementally on the behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional levels.

After all, successful democratization is really about acceptance. That is to say, relevant political forces have to work out how best to continue to submit their interests and values to the uncertain interplay of democratic institutions (Przeworski 1991: 26). This takes time, commitment, vigilance and no small amount of good luck. Indonesia has managed to come through such a process albeit not without difficulty. There may be ongoing policy ineffectiveness, judicial problems, institutional frictions and corruption issues but what is clear is that there has been substantive reform. The political system is now a functioning democracy with all the benefits and shortcomings that brings with it.

Now obviously, Indonesia is neither Arab nor in the Middle East or North Africa. We have to acknowledge that time and context differ, political cultures differ, configurations of economic elites differ, patterns of civil-military relations differ, as do respective positions within the international system of power and privilege, all to greater or lesser extents. Distinct conditioning factors will no doubt affect change in the MENA in different ways and external reactionary forces certainly exert a stronger pull. Nevertheless, if the 'Arab Spring' is to bring about lasting change for the better then replicating some of what has actually worked in Indonesia may be a place to start.

Free and Fair Elections

Firstly, there is the organization of free and fair elections to contend with in circumstances of flux and instability. A word of warning here, there is little point in assuming that elections in isolation will simply channel contests among political rivals and accord public legitimacy. There also has to be correspondent reform of state institutions, policymaking procedures and attendant recovery of civil liberties, i.e. elected officials, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, enhanced freedom of expression, access to alternative information, and expansion of associational autonomy. Indonesia's first two elections in 1999 and 2004 were the freest in more

than forty years with huge amounts of political activity and media coverage. The lifting of press restrictions, the release of political prisoners, and allowing the formation of new political parties all bore witness to its climate of reform.

Getting the military back in the barracks

Secondly, dismantling the most repressive structures of an authoritarian regime and removing the military gradually from politics are major tasks of reform. In the current situation, this means reigning in the excessive power and nefarious practices of the internal security services, aka *Mukhabarat*. Pragmatism and a distinct fear of grass-root insurrection may eventually force this issue but doing it while public demand is strong is a good idea. In Indonesia, political leaders moved quickly to separate the police from the military. Having the military onside will be essential especially in former autocracies like Tunisia and Egypt. Turning them in to an asset rather than a threat to the process is a challenge right enough but not insurmountable. Persuading the military to ‘return to the barracks’ involves investment in their professionalism (which will cost money) and an appeal to their sense of honor. They have to realise that their job is to ensure stability by upholding the constitutionally mandated institutions of public interest.

To prevent a reactionary backlash, allowing the military to retain substantial economic interests is a prudent move if a difficult pill to swallow (in the short term at least). However, a word of warning here, this cannot just be some sort of perverse exchange between essentially status quo forces. We must be exceptionally wary of ‘grand bargains’ being struck whereby political hegemony is transferred on the assurance that the military unconditionally retains its reserved economic domains and privileged status. Rather, it must be with the intention of creating enough time and space to actually institute some step-by-step reforms, the aim being to phase out gradually military embeddedness in the body politic.

Indonesia managed to reduce the socio-political role of their Armed Forces (TNI - *Tentara Nasional Indonesia*) by allowing them to retain their substantial economic interests in the short term at least. Phasing this out gradually is proving a challenging process in Indonesia yet it did pave the way for constitutional reform of the TNI’s dual function (*dwifungsi*) role in 2002 and the formal removal of their allocated seats in parliament in 2004. All of which, overtime brought

improved civilian rule over the military, albeit by degrees. This can then feed in to considerations about transitional justice. Often times a society needs to allow some of its “open wounds” to heal so that it can move on. It is an incredibly fraught and thorny process but one way to do this is to give them a good ‘airing’. This may involve the establishment of some form of truth and reconciliation commission as in East Timor (not particularly effective), depending on circumstance.

Transitional Justice

Thirdly, given the atrocities taking place in Syria, if the Assad regime falls then some sort of commission would seem almost inevitable for a meaningful and stable future in that country. The scale of the regime’s violence and the country’s crosscutting sectarian rivalries make the potential for wide-scale retribution and bloodletting a very real prospect. Moreover, the commanders heading up the paramilitary *Shabiha* units in Syria who are carrying out some of the worst crimes against the populace should be pursued with the same tenacity by the international community as similar such figures have been in the former Yugoslavia. Future prosecutions at the International Criminal Court for the worst offenders of the Syrian regime would send a strong message. Such steps are important in post conflict situations as they provide mortar to rebuild respect for state institutions and the rule of law. Restoring pride and trust in institutions such as the judiciary, law enforcement and security services is a massive task of reform that will take time and substantial effort. This also encompasses the fight against endemic corruption, cronyism, and nepotism as vital components in restoring pride and trust.

Institutional Reform

Fourthly, major constitutional and decentralisation reform are fraught with difficulties and usually uneven in their impacts but they can bring about improvements in representation and accountability, albeit by degrees. The restructured People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR - *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*) now consists entirely of popularly elected members sitting in the People’s Representative Council (DPR - *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*) and the new Regional Representatives Council (DPD - *Dewan Perwakilan Daerah*). The inauguration of the new DPD

was symbolically (and potentially structurally) a significant step. It, in effect, creates a bicameral second chamber of parliament that acts as a sort of upper house but it has to be said with extremely limited powers. For instance, the DPD possesses no veto over the budget. Having said this, altering the composition of parliament may lessen regional distrust of central government. In theory, there is the potential to give diverse communities a greater representational presence in Jakarta but the practice is considerably more ambiguous. Likewise, for instance, since 2005, *pilkada* (local elections) for hundreds of governors (*gubernur*), regents (*bupati*) and city mayors (*walikota*) has certainly altered personnel with about 40 percent of incumbents replaced but whether that has dramatically changed the new incumbents' priorities is hard to gauge. Yet, greater competition for office, logistically at least, represents a gradual dilution of the system of top-down executive appointments and manipulated assembly votes. In fact, Indonesia's 2004 elections played witness to a meaningful and extensive number of permitted political parties, stabilized election rules, amendments to decentralization legislation and constitutional limitations on the power of the executive. The success of Indonesia's 2009 elections further attests to real stabilization and routinisation. Most important for ensuring all of this is the fact that the new democratic framework is accepted. The current president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) may be ex-military but he is committed to and readily submits his interests and values to the new 'rules of the game'. This is not to say things are all plain sailing. In terms of institutionalization, the party system is still captive to personality politics and most parties are widely seen as corrupt and self-interested (Johnson Tan 2006: 88-114).

Radical Islamist Ascendancy

Fifthly, this brings us on to a major concern for future developments in the Arab world, i.e. the spectre of radical Islamist ascendancy. Any attempts to curb this are sensitive political issues. In the past, many Islamist groups in the Middle East have prospered off the deficiencies of autocrats by stepping in where the regimes had so abjectly failed, i.e. the provision of education, health and sanitation for the poorest in society. The Muslim Brotherhood and Salifist movement are prime examples in Egypt.

There is no reason to assume that developments in the Arab world will necessarily reflect western norms. But, if Indonesia teaches us anything, they do not need to and will be no less a democracy for that, if that is indeed what eventuates. In Indonesia, Islamist parties do exist, but most importantly, they accept, operate and are contained within the electoral rules of democratic contestation. Indonesia shows that moderate Islam and democratic development are not incompatible bedfellows. What emerges might not meet a western liberal definition of democracy but there is no one-size-fits-all definition of democracy rather many variations. Islamic political parties will no doubt represent an important and necessary part of any prospective democratic evolution in the MENA region.

To be sure, as mentioned earlier, the recent Islamist electoral successes in Tunisia and Egypt suggest a different political dynamic than Indonesia. Nevertheless, the tenor of the uprisings, at least in their initial phases, as well as subsequent reactions to authoritarian behaviour by elected Islamist officials, indicate that a substantial number of people in these countries, as in Indonesia, will expect parties to respect the rule of law and address their countries' economic and corruption problems. If not, we can expect more protests. Just look at the public backlash to the assassination of opposition figures Shokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi in Tunisia and the rule of Mohamed Morsi's FJP in Egypt. Attempts at a coercive institutionalisation of Islamist theocracy can and will be met with continued protests and uprisings.

However, the current situation in Egypt is unfortunately a truly worrying and ironic example of the uncertainty and turbulence of transitions. Although the liberal-secularist groupings in Egypt have been annoyed by and highly critical of Morsi's style of leadership and failures of his parties rule they may have taken what could be a disastrous shortcut that may bring deleterious repercussions in the long-term. Joining forces with the military to wash out the Muslim Brotherhood's supremacy in Egypt will be full of unintended consequences. General Sisi's government is the return of a ruler with an iron fist. Taking out political opponents outside legitimate general elections and reinstating emergency laws is no sign of democratic progress. One of the measures of democratic consolidation is the peaceful transfers of power through free and fair elections alongside greater civilian control over the military. The Indonesian's have a phrase for it: *lepas dari mulut buaya, masuk mulut harimau* (free from the crocodile's mouth, but into the mouth of a lion).

Translating frustrations into reform

Clearly, there are no guarantees during a transition but Indonesia shows us that a commitment to systematic reforms and increased contestation can bring compromise, progress and acceptance. The real issue for the Middle East is not whether it will be secular or Islamic. In many ways, this is a false dichotomy and distraction from much more pressing concerns. What we have and are witnessing in the MENA region is a simultaneous convergence of multiple social, economic and political vectors bringing things into sharp relief. Overwhelmingly, the failures of corrupt, repressive and ossified autocratic regimes have come home to roost. If we look at the conditions in these countries, there are some pretty clear clues to the storms that were brewing. We all know that there was and are massive inequalities in wealth distribution. Despite substantial wealth generation that narrow self-serving politico-business-military elites enjoyed some of which trickled down to the middle classes, economic stagnation was and is rife. Combine this with rising prices of basic foodstuffs and high unemployment amongst educated, tech savvy but disenfranchised sections of youthful populaces and you have an extremely volatile mix. Events in Tunisia simply provided the catalytic stimulus to set in train a cathartic outpouring of wider frustrations few anticipated but not all were surprised at when things finally erupted. What the people of the region now have to do is find ways to strike a different ‘social contract’ by translating the popular social momentum for greater political freedoms, effective rule of law and better living conditions (that brought down their autocrats) into representative capacity. As in Indonesia, this means establishing political competition and relevant political forces learning how to operate within the new ‘rules of the game’ if they are to have influence.

Conclusion

Please do not think I am being overly optimistic here, I am not. One need only look at the tragedy unfolding in Syria to get a grim reminder of the odious brutality of authoritarian regimes. Especially when you have a despot desperate to cling to power shored up by the geostrategic interests of powerful international actors, namely Iran, Russia and to a lesser extent China.

Leaving Syria (not forgetting Bahrain) aside for a moment as it is some way short of being at the same stage as other ‘uprising’ countries, the present moment in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and

Yemen is now a transition period. An entrance into uncertainty characterized by opportunity but also fraught with danger. While there is no denying the significance of their uprisings, an unfettered triumphalism is premature at this stage.

The ousting of Ben Ali, Mubarak et al is a sign of encouragement, a first profound step yes but just a beginning, an opening. As I have said all along, the real work and the real difficulties start after the downfalls. We are already seeing that the new rules of the political game are not yet defined and most definitely, in flux. They are and will be fiercely contested. The organisational structures of the old regimes in these countries have not just vanished and their legacies will not simply disappear. There is strong residual presence, which will continue to constrain reform even as the old institutional structures unravel. We can expect 'old' actors to contest for power as they try to stage a return to the political arena in different ways. It is, therefore, of more importance for countries like Tunisia and Egypt to focus on the slow and difficult process of diminishing power asymmetries by constitutionally de-coupling the corrupt and corrupting nexus between politics, business and the military. This will require courage on all sides. Leaders of emerging oppositions will need to negotiate with regime moderates and seize the opportunity provided by the uprisings to push hard for concessions from disoriented regimes. Keeping them honest, as Australians would say, is bolstered by the fact that popular attitudes are well tempered by strong doses of mistrust towards established political circles.

The international community must also be careful not to deprive these events of their most powerful aspect. They are mass popular uprisings against repressive rule. Ones that have directly contradicted the hegemonic narratives long spun by these regimes that their secular strongmen were both the guarantors of stability and the only bulwark against a fanatical Islamist takeover. Resulting outcomes could be transformative in their impact on a regional order that has, for decades, elevated regime stability and western interests above the democratic and participatory desires of its inhabitants. If given the chance and the right sort of international support and conditional strategic aid, a prospective Tunisian, Egyptian, or Libyan democracy will be something the people in these countries learn and build for themselves. As many Indonesians used to say in the early days of their transition, *belajar berdemokrasi* (learning democracy). A difficult journey has just begun but I cannot see the people of these countries and others wanting to turn back. They have confronted their fears, risked their lives and reclaimed their dignity. The

taste for freedom of expression and assembly enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of protestors is not easily assuaged. I for one will watch with interest to see how these political systems will have to adapt. Given the tenor of the last decade, let us just hope that the West starts building some bridges for all the ditches it has dug.

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