

## Indonesia, Islam and Democracy

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### Introduction

A spectacular phenomenon at the level of political philosophy is the universal acknowledgement toward democracy; nowadays the political legitimacy of a nation is generally measured by its level of democracy. Many analysts believe that the end of the 20th century was a period of the most promising progress of democracy in the modern history of civilization. In his book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Last Twentieth Century*, Samuel Huntington presented some interesting data. From 30 countries that experienced with transition towards democracy during 1974-1992, approximately three-quarters of the countries were dominated by a predominantly Catholic population, which included southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece), Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Chile), Eastern Europe (Czech, Romania, Poland), Africa (Botswana) and Asia (Philippines). What happened to the third wave of democratization, according to Huntington, was a Catholic wave.

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a number of countries in North Africa and the Middle East have gone through political flare-ups caused by mass protests and demands for democratization. Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have shown the return of disappointment in the aftermath of the downfall of Presidents Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Muammar Qaddafi.

Based on these developments, this article seeks to analyze whether there is incompatibility between Islam and Muslims and democracy? It looks at aspects of democracy and the Islamic principles, and analyze the case of Indonesia, a country with Muslim majority and a democratic system.

### The Meaning of Democracy

Democracy is a familiar word. However, various discourses on democracy often do not touch the substance of democracy itself. Knowledge and comprehensive understanding about democracy is needed. Therefore, before I go into in-depth discussion about democracy in the Islamic world, it is better to provide preliminary explanation about the meaning and essentiality of democracy.

Historically, democracy has been developed since ancient Greek era (300-400 BC), as the result of philosophical dialogue among Athens city-state citizens as a reaction against the monarchy dictatorship in Greece. Democracy was practiced as a system where all citizens formed an assembly; then of 10,000 citizens, which made such assembly plausible. Democracy was not yet substantively implemented, because most citizens, especially women, did not have political rights. There is no separation of power because all officials had full responsibility to the assembly that controlled the executive, legislative and judiciary systems.<sup>1</sup>

In its development, the idea of modern democracy evolved along the *renaissance* since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These new ideas are *secularism*, promoted by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), *social contract* by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and the idea of *state constitution, liberalism, and separation of power* by John Locke (1632-1704), which was further refined by Montesquieu (1689-1755) and JJ Rousseau (1712-1778). Enlightenment ideas are in essence a form of intellectual response to the end of the absolute monarchy that replaced the medieval church authority. On the other hands, it could be said that the current form of modern democracy started since the independence of the United States of America in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1779. In line

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<sup>1</sup> Masykuri Abdillah, *Demokrasi Di Persimpangan Makna: Respons Intelektual Muslim Indonesia terhadap Konsep Demokrasi 1966-1933* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 1999), 71.

with contemporary theoretical developments and political practices, the definition and criteria of democracy have gone through several adjustments.<sup>2</sup>

The definition of democracy can be analyzed using an etymological approach. Democracy consists of two words that come from Greek: *demos*, which means people or citizen in a certain place; and *cratein* or *cratos*, which means power or sovereignty. Therefore, etymologically, democracy is a state where the sovereignty is at the hands of peoples, and the highest authority is on joint decision of the people.<sup>3</sup>

A broader understanding of democracy has been presented by a large number of scholars. According to Joseph A. Schmeter, "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."<sup>4</sup> According to Sidney Hook, "democracy is form of government in which the major decisions of government rest directly or indirectly on the freely given consent of majority of the adults governed."<sup>5</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl view that "democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives."<sup>6</sup> According to Henry B. Mayo, "a democratic political system is one in which public policies are made on a majority basis by representatives subject to effective popular control at periodic elections which are conducted on the principle of political equality and under conditions of political freedom."<sup>7</sup> From these various definitions of democracy, I conclude that a state with democratic system is a state

<sup>2</sup> Abdillah, Democracy in the intersection of meaning: Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals' Responses towards Democracy Concept (1966-1933)/ *Demokrasi Di Persimpangan Makna: Respons Intelektual Muslim Indonesia terhadap Konsep Demokrasi (1966-1933)*, 71-72.

<sup>3</sup> ICCE UIN Jakarta Team, *Demokrasi, Hak Asasi Manusia, dan Masyarakat Madani* (Jakarta: ICCE UIN Jakarta dan Prenada Media, 2003), 110.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1943), 269.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Hook, "Democracy" dalam *The Encyclopaedia Americana*, vol. 8 (Danburry and Connecticut: Grolier Incorporated, 1984), 683.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "What Democracy is...and is not," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Summer 1991), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Henry B. Mayo, *An Intoduction to Democratic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 70.

that runs on the basis of the will of the people. In other words, democracy means organizing the state with the consent of the people.

As a system, democracy emphasizes on the existence of authority in the hands of people, both in administration and government. "Authority in the hands of the people" can have three interpretations. *First*, it can mean a *legitimate government*. From the people's perspective, a legitimate government means a government that gets the recognition and support from the people. In the context of democracy, legitimacy is important for a government as the implementation of the mandate given by people. *Second*, it can mean a government that carries out the power in the name of people, and not in the instigation of themselves or their own desires. It also means that *the government is under the control of society*. Social control can be done directly by the people or indirectly through a parliament, which is the manifestation of check and balance principle in democracy. *Third*, it can mean that the power given by the people to government has to be used only for peoples' interest. In other words, *the peoples' interest must come first and prioritized beyond everything*. Therefore, in formulating and running its programs, the government must accommodate the aspiration of the people, by guaranteeing the freedom to do so, both directly and indirectly. In relation to these understandings, a political regime can be democratic if it implements three things; (1) performing a free and fair election; (2) developing the pattern of a competitive political sphere; and (3) giving protection towards people's freedom.<sup>8</sup>

### Islam and Democracy: The Search for Compatibility

Discussions on Islam and democracy are always interesting, particularly on whether Islam is in line with democracy. Debates on this question can be based not only on Islamic doctrine but also on the history of Islam. As democracy is a system of governance where sovereignty lies at the hands of the people, many will say that this contradicts with the doctrine of Islam, as in the Islamic view, sovereignty lies in the hands of God. Advocates of this argument usually put forward three arguments.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), 1-16.

*First*, Islam has a different understanding of a "nation," or *ummah*. In modern democracy, a nation is tied to a physical space marked by territorial and geographical borders. On the other hand, in Islam, a nation is not bound by borders, but by *aqidah* (the basic tenets of Islam). Therefore, for many Muslims, a "nation" is defined by faith, not by geography. *Second*, democracy is seen as a worldly value. In Islam, where spiritual goals are of primary importance, democracy thus becomes a secondary goal. *Third*, in democracy, the people's sovereignty is absolute, meaning that the people are the ultimate holders of power. Laws and regulations are decided by the people through their representatives and not by God. In Islam, the people's sovereignty is not absolute at all, since it is bound by the laws of Islam, and only God's sovereignty is absolute.

These three arguments are quite often proposed by Muslim scholars, such as Abu A'la Al-Maududi, who perceive Islam as a blue print of life so that there is no rule of life except what God has established in the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet. Therefore, from such point of view, democracy cannot be implemented in the Muslim societies.

Nevertheless, many Muslim scholars would argue the contrary; that is, democracy is in line with Islamic teachings. Their views are based on the understanding that the principles of universal doctrines of Islam, among others justice (*al-'adl*), freedom (*hurriyyah*), forum (*syura*), and equity (*al-musawah*), are compatible with democracy. At this level, Islam is not about the procedural system; rather, the substantial basis and spirit of democracy. This is the starting point of the views of some Muslim scholars, such as Yusuf al-Qardhawi, that Islam and democracy have a conformity in matters that are substantive. If the meaning of democracy is the freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of speech, and the principle of equality before the law, as well as the guarantee of basic human rights, then it is in accordance with Islam, as all of these are guaranteed also by Islam. More intensive and in-depth studies are thus important.

### **Democracy in the Islamic World**

With the argument that there are principles of Islam that are compatible with democracy, the question is why the massive third wave of democracy, which has brought down the walls of authoritarian power

in a number of countries, was not present in the Islamic world? Interestingly, there are several cultural factors that have slowed the growth of democracy in the Islamic countries, in particular in the Middle East. *First*, there is a strong monolithic paradigm of thought over Islam. Such paradigm stems from the Middle Eastern Muslims' limited understanding of Islam's nature, particularly with regard to the Qur'an, hadith, and history. Islam is often viewed as a divine instrument for understanding the world and such a perception has prompted some Muslims to believe that Islam offers a complete way of life (*kaffah*). According to this view, Islam is an all-encompassing system of belief that offers a solution to all problems.

*"Islam consist of three D, namely dîn (religion), dunyâ (world), and dawlah (state). Therefore, Islam becomes totality that offer solution for human kind. Islam should be accepted in its entirety and implemented in family life, economics, and politics. For them, the existence of an Islamic society should be coupled with the establishment of an Islamic state, which is an ideological state based on Islamic values are comprehensive."*<sup>9</sup>

This view of Islam has a number of implications. If Islam is applied at the level of political ideology and political practice, this could lead to the political belief that: (1) Islam must become the state's basis of existence; and (2) Islamic jurisprudence must be accepted as the state's constitution and sovereignty would lie in the hands of God. In short, the modern political system of rule by the people is in direct conflict with Islam.

*Second*, the absence of democracy in the Middle East could also be explained by the weak political will of the regimes to accommodate democracy in their political system. Leadership has long been based on family ties and regimes would lose this prerogative.

*Third*, the most ironic thing about the absence of democracy in the Middle East is the often tacit support of the Western world — the US in particular — for the existence of the authoritarian regimes. I view that the US has seemed to care less about whether Middle Eastern autocracies developed any democratic character than about how they were able to secure the US's various economic, imperialistic interests.

<sup>9</sup> Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 63-64.

## Indonesia: The Example of Compatibility of Islam and Democracy

The absence of democracy in countries of the Middle East is not necessarily reflected in other countries with Muslim population. Indonesia, for example, has seen much success in the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system. While Indonesia still has a long way to go before democracy fully takes root, at the very least it has been quite successful in tearing down the walls of tyrannical power.

The general elections in 1999, 2004 and 2009 were testaments to the wave of democratization in Indonesia, while the direct presidential elections have indicated a new phase of history in Indonesian politics. However, the most substantial and revolutionary change has occurred at the level of civil society. Muslims in Indonesia, slowly but surely, have grown and developed into a rational, autonomous and progressive community. They have started to think rationally and critically, especially when facing political and religious elites, which tend to be intrusive, manipulative and exploitative.

The basis of Indonesian Muslims' political preference is more their rational reasoning. The courage to think rationally has contributed to the creation of a free public sphere, which this has been instrumental for Muslims in Indonesia to create the culture of open and fair political participation. The role of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, who actively promote the values of democracy, has been immense. There are a number of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals who support the values of freedom, democracy, and tolerance; most are affiliated with Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. They play an important role in enlightening Muslims in Indonesia through media, discussion forums, and public lectures.

Abdurrahman Wahid is one of Indonesia's most influential Muslim intellectuals, whose one of major contributions was convincing Indonesian Muslims to accept democracy and *Pancasila* as the basis of the state, and that *Pancasila* is not against Islam. Abdurrahman Wahid openly criticized the idea of an Islamic state and rejected the formalization of Islamic law. Nurcholish Madjid is another well-known intellectual, who consistently promoted the separation of religion from political interests. He was opposed to the idea of an Islamic state and Islamic political parties. He claimed that Muslims must channel their

political aspirations in non-religious parties. He also believed that it was more important for Muslims not to push for an Islamic law; rather, they should pay more attention on substantial matters such as education and welfare.

Indonesia can be seen as a proof that Islamic doctrines do not contradict democracy. As the most populous Muslim country in the world, Indonesia can play a significant role in spreading democratization in the Islamic world. Democracy should serve as the major capital of Indonesia in diplomacy. In the future, through diplomatic channels of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (formerly known as Organization of the Islamic Conference), Indonesia should intensively and continuously promote political awareness for democracy. If Indonesia can play this role well, it is not impossible that Indonesia would become the new leader of the Islamic world that has for decades been dominated by Middle Eastern countries.

### **Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: The Challenges**

Democracy in Indonesia is not without challenges. Three major challenges exist: the behavior of the political elite, corruption, intolerance and anarchist groups. After 15 years transition from the authoritarian regime, democracy seems to just be a catch phrase from political elites, whose concerns are not about how to bring prosperity to the people, but rather about when and how to seize, run, and maintain power. Such sad reality has caused anxiety and brings questions on whether the choice of the nation's democracy taken by Indonesia is the right path. If such anxiety continues, it is possible that this situation will accumulate public disappointment, and at the same time undermine their trust in the political parties as the main pillar of democracy.

At the early days of reform era, public put their trust and high expectations on the political parties as the hope for life of the nation's change towards a better direction. However, voters' turn-out has steadily declined in elections (see Figure 1). In addition, an increasing number of floating mass in Indonesia today as recorded in a survey can be seen as an illustration of the accumulation of public disappointment on the performance of political parties.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting, "The Trend of Swing Voter of Political Party Voters Towards 2014," Survey 5-16 September 2012.



**Figure 1: The Participation Rate in 1999-2009 Election**

No	Election	% of voters turn-out	% of non-voters
1	The 1999 Legislative election	92.6 percent	7.3 percent
2	The 2004 Legislative election	84.1 percent	15.9 percent
3	The 2004 President Election (First Round)	78.2 percent	21.8 percent
4	The 2004 President Election (Second Round)	76.6 percent	23.4 percent
5	The 2009 Legislative Election	70.9 percent	29.01 percent
6	The 2009 President Election	71.7 percent	28.3 percent

Source: The General Elections Commission

Corruption is the second major challenge to democracy in Indonesia. Corruption in Indonesia is systemic, and widespread at the executive, legislative, and judicial levels. Figure 2 shows the index of perception of corruption in Indonesia in 2003-2010.

**Figure 2: Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2003-2011**

Years	CPI
2003	1.9
2004	2.0
2005	2.2
2006	2.4
2007	2.3
2008	2.6
2009	2.8
2010	2.8
2011	3.0

Source: Transparency International Indonesia

The third major challenge is intolerance. The existence of anarchist groups has become a phenomenon of Indonesian democracy in the reform era, and seems to be an integral part of democratic life in Indonesia. When the anarchist group can freely commit violence against other groups that have a different view, elements of democracy no longer exist.

## **Conclusion**

Indonesia has seen much success in the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system of governance, which means that the absence of democracy in countries of the Middle East does not necessarily mean incompatibility between Islam and democracy. If Indonesia can overcome the major challenges that it is currently experiencing during the democratization process, for Indonesia to become an ideal example of a Muslim democratic country is a possibility.