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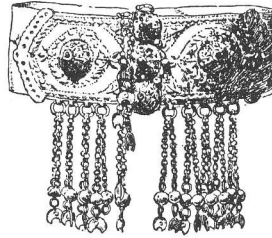
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The Challenge of Democracy in the Muslim World

Dadi Darmadi

*I*s it true that in the Muslim world the more Islamic a country is the less likely it is to be democratic? This type of question may sound unpleasant and probably offensive to some Muslims. However, the empirical data produced by the Freedom House (2001) discloses this tendency. Out of 47 countries in the world with Muslim majorities, only 11 (or 23 per cent) can be regarded as having truly adopted democracy and have gone through a relatively stable period of the consolidation of democracy. Meanwhile, in the non-Muslim world, 110 out of 145 countries (more than 75 per cent) have democratically elected governments. We may draw the conclusion from this data that in the non-Muslim world, a country is three times more likely to be democratic than one in the Muslim world.

Mali in sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh in sub-Continental Asia have been recent examples of Muslim countries adopting democracy. Despite their struggle to overcome economic problems, the two relatively poor countries have shown a fairly stable consolidation of democracy. Some

other countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, Azerbaijan, Malaysia and Indonesia have long struggled to adopt a certain degree of democracy. Labeled as semi-democratic countries by some, these Muslim countries have faced growing public aspirations for the implementation of a democratic political system. Among all, however, Malaysia and Turkey have long experienced democratization process, although though both countries have periodically struggled with anti-democratic movements.

Why it is so hard to adopt democracy in the Muslim world? What are the biggest challenges to democracy in these countries? Is Islam a factor that hampers and becomes a barrier to the building of democratic political systems in these areas? This question was embarked upon during a two-day international conference entitled "The Challenge of Democracy in the Muslim World," held at the Sari Pan Pacific Hotel, Jakarta, March 18-20, 2002. This conference compared the findings of a wide variety of scholars with expertise in Islam and politics in many parts of the Islamic world. R. William Liddle, Richard Herrmann and Saiful Mujani (Ohio State University), Bahgat Korany (Universite de Montreal), Daniel Brumberg, Michael Hudson (Georgetown University), Lisa Anderson (Columbia University), and James Piscatori (Oxford University) presented papers. In addition, Binnaz Toprak (Bogazici University, Turkey), William Fierman (Indiana University), Mark Tessler (University of Michigan), Leonardo A. Villalon (University of Kansas), and Marvin Weinbaum (University of Illinois) also shared their research findings with the audience. Labouari Addi of University of Lyon France was not present at the conference but sent an article to the conference.

For many, it is often taken for granted that matching Islam and democracy is no easy task. Some scholars have come up with critical questions and critiques on whether Islam can be a factor in the democratization process in Muslim countries. In the Arab world, for instance, while several regimes have gradually increased political and civil rights — something that was not prevalent two or three decades ago — solid and stable democracy has not yet occurred in these regions. Lisa Anderson, for example, is skeptical regarding the potential for the development of democracy in the Arab world, where certain nations had experienced long-standing despotism and disorder. While many regimes in much of the world are increasingly attracted to adopting liberalism and democracy, "why



did the political regimes of this region greet the 21st century suspended between tyranny and strife?" she asked.

Such influential works as Elie Kedouri's Democracy and Arab Political Culture (1992) strongly supports this rather pessimistic view of democratic consolidation in the Arab world. One of his well-quoted statements is that, "democracy is alien to the mind-set of people in the Arab world."

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In the last two decades, democracy has been widely accepted and recognized as probably the finest political system in many countries in the world. Not only has it been developed by countries in North America and Western Europe, but countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union have also adopted it. With a growing interest in adopting a better political system, democracy has also been increasingly accepted and applied in many Asian and African countries. Nevertheless, this does not mean that democracy is easily icon applied in some other countries.

According to Azyumardi Azra in his keynote speech at the conference, the Freedom House report is not at all negative in showing how democracy works in Muslim countries. At least the report still indicates that, in his

own words, "Islam is not inherently incompatible with democratic values." The report shows that there are indeed some "bright spots" of democracy in countries with large Muslim populations such as Albania, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, and some sub-Saharan African countries. Interestingly, these countries are all located outside the Arab world, and have been known for being the least Arabized Muslim-majority countries.

Many have long and hotly debated the problems of making democracy work in the Muslim world. Azra has listed at least five reasons for the weakness of democracy in most parts of the Muslim world. First, he sites a lack of adequate infrastructure and the necessary prerequisites for building democratic nations. Second, he argues that there is still a strong tendency among some Muslim groups to maintain their belief in the unity of religion and politics. Third, the failure of Muslim states in adopting democracy has largely resulted from their failure to implement democratic practices. Another reason he gives is the comparatively and relatively absence of a democratic culture in many Muslim countries. Finally, he sites the weakness or dysfunction nature of "civil society" groups or organizations in these countries as a hindrance to the adoption of democracy. With these five factors as a background, therefore, Azyumardi Azra asserts that the enhancement of democratic consolidation is not an easy task for many Muslim countries.

Interestingly enough, the question as to whether Islam is inherently responsible for the weakness of democratic institutions does not always get an affirmative response. At least in the case of Islam in South Asia, as suggested by Marvin G. Weinbaum, the reason for the struggle in adopting democracy in these regions cannot be placed at the "doors of Islam." He is a firm believer in that in countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan for example, the widespread crises of unresolved military-civilian relations and the failure of successive governments to address this is a far more significant factors in determining whether better consolidation of democracy can be accomplished in these countries.

Nevertheless, comparatively speaking, the challenges to democracy in the Muslim world vary from one nation to another. It seems that different

social and political backgrounds, including indigenous cultural, economic and political factors, have largely dictated the current state of affairs.

In the long history of Turkey, the struggle between the “secularists” and the “Islamists” has raged on for years as the process of the democratization of the political system continues to take place in the country. One of the lessons we may take from the Turkish case is, as suggested by Binnaz Toprak, the visibility of “moderate politics.” The Turkish government has opened up space for Islamist groups to run their organizations, which lean towards increasing political Islam. But, the government also has demanded the Islamist groups apply moderate politics as a consideration to secularist groups.

Interesting features on the issue of Islam and democracy have emerged in some Sahelian West African Countries such as Senegal, Mali and Niger. According to Leonardo Villalon, against all the odds predicting the difficulty of the emergence of democracy in these regions, these Francophone states are worthy of attention. Since the early 1990s in particular, these countries showed such successful experimentation with democracy that at the end of in the year 2000, they were categorized as “formal democracies.”

Meanwhile, foreign influences must also be taken into account in understanding existing political condition in the Arab world. Richard K. Herrmann, for example, shrewdly attacked the issue of international factors and democracy in the Muslim world. While he carefully does not blame international factors as responsible for the weakness of democratic processes in the Muslim world, he is of the opinion that major geo-political trends may indeed significantly influence domestic political development in many Muslim countries.

James Piscatori mentions that even in a country like Saudi Arabia, despite its long standing rule by absolute monarchy, there have been signs of hope for the developments of the seeds of democracy. In the last few years, largely because of various social and political changes in the Gulf region, there have been gradual indications of the emergence of institutions within the government, media, and economy that could be considered as liberalizing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Although many believe that full democracy would be rather difficult to establish in the Arab world, sustainable liberal and pluralistic opening are not impossible. With some exceptions, says Mark Tessler, in the last few years, the Arab world has shown progress in political liberalization. His study of the impact of religious orientations on attitudes toward de-

both ways: some factors seem to aid in initiating the democratization process, while at the same time, other factors constitute obstacles that hold back the consolidation of democracy.

The French scholar of Islamic political thought, Olivier Roy, has lately suggested that political Islam has “failed” in many parts of the Arab world. If this is true, how is the current map of political Islam in other parts of the world?

There is an interesting feature in the context of Islam in Indonesia. Regarding the much-debated increase in religious radicalism in Indonesia, many have discussed the possibility of an Islamic state in Indonesia. Based on their observation, R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani firmly believe that the possibility of an Islamic state emerging has been greatly exaggerated for a long time. They argue that the potential for an Islamic state is largely overstated both by its proponents and opponents. They warn against the prevailing and widespread misconceptions and misperceptions among different groups, both Muslims and non-Muslims, that exaggerate the significance of the fast emerging and rapidly appearing Islamic radical groups. There is, however, a real danger of dividing non-Muslims, syncretists, traditionalists and liberal modernist Muslims on one side, and conservative modernist Muslims on the other. This problem will unfortunately pose the biggest challenge to democratic consolidation in Indonesia.

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Overall, the international conference which was made possible by a cooperation between Mershon Center Ohio State University, PPIM (Center for the Study of Islam and Society) IAIN Jakarta, and the Asia Foundation, successfully discussed the main issues presented in the two full day panels. Still, there are many intriguing issues that need further exploration and explanation. Despite presenting their own findings on different areas of the Muslim world, the speakers represented two different approaches in understanding the nature of democracy in the Islamic world. Some of these speakers were convinced of the positive openings of current political development in much of the Muslim world. Others are skeptical and rather pessimistic, raising some critical questions and shrewd analyses although in a quite appropriate manner to the issues.

The similar conference was also held in Padang (West Sumatra), Yogyakarta and Makassar (South Sulawesi). Although the conference was held for a limited number of active participants to share their views, the conference received media attention nationwide. For example, The Jakarta Post, the leading Jakarta-based English language newspaper, reviewed the issue of the challenge of democracy in the Muslim world in its editorial the following day after the conference.

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