

Southeast Asia

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The political drama in the Malay archipelago continues to be played out in terms of the traditional Malay-Indonesian shadow theatre: the Wayang of Kerajaan. But it is impossible to deny that the latest developments in Malaysia and Indonesia have also marked a major shift in the political terrain of the two countries, with the Islamic parties and movements there poised to enter the charmed circle of *kerajaan* politics once again. This is something to which both the governments and the intellectual communities of the region cannot be indifferent.

The results of the recent Indonesian elections were quite surprising for many observers of Indonesian politics. Up to the last minute, there were those who felt that victory for either the liberal democrat Megawati Sukarnoputri or the conservative B. J. Habibie was certain. It was expected that the Muslim parties in the middle would have made strong gains, and that popular Muslim leaders like Abdulrahman Wahid and Dr Amien Rais would eventually rise to take up the role of kingmakers in the new government. But few could have guessed that the mantle of the state would fall onto the leader of the Nahdatul Ulama, one of the two biggest Islamist movements in Indonesia, Abdulrahman Wahid himself.

Observers, experts and laymen alike, are now stumped to give adequate answers and explanations for this radical turn in Indonesian politics. For years, the Indonesian state has tried to ensure that Islamist organizations and parties would never be allowed to mobilize strongly enough as to be able to challenge the status quo. The Indonesian army (ABRI) played its part in keeping the so-called 'threat' of political Islam at bay, even when the appearance of Islamic groups such as the Islamist separatist movement in Aceh, North Sumatra, actually represented the genuine grievances of poor and alienated Indonesians who felt that their rights had been trampled on by the political elite based in Jakarta.

But the signs were there for those who were able to see them: from the late 1980s, the Indonesian elite began to accommodate itself to the changes in the public's mood. The government opened up Islamic think-tanks and research centres, and began to patronize Islamic conferences and intellectuals. It was clear that the powers-that-be in Jakarta could not afford to neglect the demands of this massive constituency outside the corridors of power. When Dr Amien Rais declared that he and his movement, the Muhammadiyah, would no longer support the Suharto government in 1998, it became clear to all that the Islamic consensus had been broken and that the Islamist movements were no longer going to tolerate the excesses and corruption of the Suharto clique. The rest is history.

Today in neighbouring Malaysia, a similar scenario seems to be on the verge of unfolding. After decades of uninterrupted rule, the Malaysian government which is made up of the ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional) alliance and led by the Conservative-Nationalist UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) party, is facing the worse crisis of its history.

The biggest gains in the 1999 Malaysian election (though not necessarily in terms of parliamentary seats) were made by the Islamic opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). PAS has been the major nemesis of UMNO since the 50s, and its tactic has been to slowly whittle away support for UMNO from the Malay-Muslim constituency that happens to be the main supporter of both parties. (Because of the polarized nature of

# Islam vs Secularism?

## The New Political Terrain in Malaysia and Indonesia

Malaysian race-centred politics, voters tend to vote along racial, rather than ideological lines. The Malays have traditionally split their votes between the conservative UMNO party and the Islamist PAS party. It is easy to see why PAS has scored a victory here: the Party has effectively placed itself on the political map of Malaysia as the main opposition party in the country, brushing aside the liberal and leftist alternatives, the DAP, PRM and PKN. The Islamist discourse that PAS espouses has become part of mainstream political discourse in the country, and like it or not, all the other parties are forced to recognize that a new agenda has been laid on the table.

### Flawed perceptions

Why is it that the Malaysian government and the UMNO party in particular have managed to lose so much support from the Malays? To compare Malaysia to Indonesia would be unfair, for the simple reason that the two countries are literally worlds apart. Yet both the Malaysian (and Indonesian) political elite have miscalculated on several major points: Malaysia and Indonesia remain essentially Islamic countries where the majority of the populations are Muslim (60% in Malaysia, 90% in Indonesia). Thus it is clear from the start that the governments of both countries could not neglect the culturally specific demands of their respective electorates. What made matters worse for the rulers of both countries was that the ruling elite were seen to enjoy a standard of life so radically different from that of the masses.

Secondly, the governments of both countries made the mistake of neglecting Islam and Muslim concerns at the beginning, and later compounded the error by trying to domesticate Islam when it was seen as a 'threat' to their political and economic livelihood. In Indonesia, the rulers regarded many of the Islamist movements as essentially rural concerns run by backward peasants and village preachers. The Islamic party in Malaysia was likewise treated as a farmyard phenomenon. Later when these Islamist movements and parties grew more powerful, the governments of both countries tried to defuse the threat they felt by trying to co-opt the Islamists into the dominant power structure. In Malaysia, this happened when the UMNO party co-opted the leader of the Islamic youth movement, Anwar Ibrahim, into the government. Anwar later rose to become the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia until he was removed and arrested in 1998. But by then the Islamists had penetrated into practically every adjunct of political, governmental, economic and educational life in the country. The co-optation of Islamists in Indonesia did not help the Suharto government either, as they later withdrew their support from him during the 1997-1998 crisis.

Thirdly, the governments made the mistake of thinking that they could force their

own Islamic agenda on a passive electorate who would follow them obediently. Malaysia experimented with its own version of 'official Islam' from the 1980s, as soon as Dr Mahathir Mohamad came to power. Dr Mahathir's own brand of progressive Islam seems rational and acceptable enough to most sensible people: He opposed the fanaticism and intolerance that can be found in other parts of the Islamic world and called on the Malay-Muslims to be open-minded, worldly and practical in their orientation.

But unfortunately for the government in Malaysia, Islamic discourse, like political discourse in general, is not something that is easily controlled and policed. Despite the many measures made to develop a progressive brand of modernist Islam in the country (via initiatives such as the International Islamic University, the Islamic Research Institute, the state's Islamic Centre, etc.), there has now appeared a more popular brand of Islamist discourse which is shaped by developments both at home as well as abroad. Developments in foreign lands such as the Gulf War, the continuing struggle in Palestine, the persecution of Bosnians and Chechnyans, and the emergence of extremist Islamist movements in the Arab world, have all contributed to the formation of a new politicized Islamist discourse that has taken a life of its own and is beyond the control of the state.

### Enter the new discourse

This is why the political and economic crisis that began in 1997 that affected Malaysia and Indonesia were quickly reconfigured on Islamist terms and turned into a religious struggle against the incumbent political leadership of both countries. It is ironic that Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who first introduced the Islamization programme to Malaysia, is now being attacked by young Islamists on the grounds that he is 'secular' and 'un-Islamic'. Unflattering comparisons between him and the Shah of Iran, the Pharaoh of Egypt, and the devil himself have become the norm in the Islamist jargon of the streets. The prevalence of this popular Islamist discourse will shape the terrain of political struggle in the years to come, and undoubtedly create new political frontiers and political identities in the process.

In the past, political struggles in the Malay archipelago have been configured along the lines of secular politics where the main objectives were winning control of the state and distribution of resources. But today the struggles have been injected with an ethical and religious dimension as well, colouring the actors and agents concerned and upping the stakes in the contest itself. The Malay political world made up of Malaysia and Indonesia will now be battling for more than control of governments and the machinery of state. What has become the objective of political struggle is the soul of the people themselves. Trying to grapple with this new development will be a task in itself.

The governments of Malaysia and Indonesia therefore need to address the rapidly changing socio-cultural terrain of their own communities in order to make sure that they will not be wrong-footed in the future. With Islam now firmly planted on the political map as one of the most important (and unpredictable) variables, the elite in Malaysia and Indonesia need to be conscious of how they proceed. The cost of failure will be great, for it will have serious implications for the creation of democratic space and civil society in both countries. ♦

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