

Institutional Activities

MARTIN VAN BRUINESSEN

ISIM's first international conference held in Leiden, 10-12 December 1999, concerned the role of Islam, Islamic political thought, Muslim parties and organizations, and the responses of secular or non-Muslim circles to the resurgence of Islam in the electoral process. The stimuli for this conference were the fact that 1999 was witness to important elections in three major countries, Turkey, Indonesia and Nigeria, and that Islam had been a crucial factor in these events – although in a different way in each case.

Indonesia experienced its first free elections since 1955, and a wide range of parties took part. In the months leading up to the elections, the country was afflicted by a series of violent conflicts that often took the form of Muslim-Christian clashes. The leaders of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais, played central roles in the transition to the post-Suharto era. Both chose, however, to style themselves as national rather than Muslim leaders. The political parties with which they are most closely associated are secular parties that attracted also non-Muslim votes. The explicitly Muslim parties polled considerably less strongly than had been expected.

The 1999 elections in Turkey indicated that the apparently irresistible rise of the Islamist Virtue (Fazilet) Party has been brought to a halt. The 'silent coup' of February 1997, by which the military leadership forced prime minister Erbakan to resign, and the repressive anti-Islamist policies of the following years have not led to greater numbers of pro-Islamic protest votes. Many of those who voted for the Islamist party in the past appear to have voted for conservative or ultra-nationalist parties this year.

In Nigeria, where Muslims make up about half the population, none of the candidates in the 1999 presidential elections were Muslim. Nonetheless, Islam did play an important role in the elections as the votes of the Muslim electorate were to be decisive. In order to win, the candidates had to gain the confidence and loyalties of a large part of the Muslim voters.

The aim of the Islam and the Electoral Process conference was to highlight the various modalities of the democratic process and the place of Muslim political behaviour in it through comparisons between countries and by a juxtaposition of different perspectives on the electoral process. In order to broaden the range of comparison, two other countries where elections took place in 1999 were added: Yemen, which is practically 100% Muslim, and India, where the Muslims constitute a minority.

For each country, two to four scholars were invited to contribute papers on different aspects of the electoral process. The papers were grouped not by country but in three broad thematic categories:

# Islam and the Electoral Process

## An International Conference

- Muslim political thought and ideology (for the panel entitled 'Expressing Islam')
- the organization and performance of Muslim political parties or non-party associations (for the panel entitled 'Empowering Islam')
- the responses of other political actors (notably the military, but also civilian non-Muslim groups and secularist politicians) to Islamic political activity (for the panel entitled 'Disarming Islam').

The conference was opened with a keynote speech by Professor James Piscatori (Oxford) on the origins and development of the idea of representation in Muslim political thought. Tracing the historical dialectic between theocratic elitism and democratic populism, and showing how in one form or another, the concept of democracy has – at least in principle – found almost universal acceptance in the Muslim world, this intro-

duction provided an excellent backdrop to the entire conference. Each of the contributions illustrated how flexible and responsive to concrete situations Muslim politics tends to be.

### Electoral Politics

In most electoral democracies, the vote of an illiterate peasant has the same weight as that of a secular nationalist intellectual, a Marxist ideologist, or a learned religious scholar. A single woman's vote, moreover, is worth as much as that of any man, and an unbeliever's equals that of a pious Muslim. Much as democracy may be applauded in principle, all elites are uncomfortable with the egalitarianism of the voting booth. Nationalists, socialists and Islamists may claim to speak on behalf of the masses, but the voting behaviour of the masses has been notoriously out of step with the wishes of those ideologists. Understandably, the purveyors of ideologies that appeal to the masses tend to be suspicious of the masses whom they claim to represent, and they are often inclined to reserve privileged roles for ideological avant-gardes – a concept that appears to be incompatible with 'one person, one vote' democracy.

The attitudes of Muslim thinkers and activists towards the established democratic process have ranged from an aversion to politics or a total rejection of the existing system and its values, through aloofness or pragmatism, to a wholehearted endorsement of politics, in which the act of voting can be seen as an affirmation of religious commitment. Periods in which elections and parliamentary politics were seen as the major avenue towards desired changes have alternated with periods of dismay and disappointment with this particular form of mobilization.

Military elites in most Muslim countries have had, at best, ambivalent attitudes towards the mass mobilization taking place in the electoral process. They too have claimed to represent the real interests of the entire nation and have arrogated themselves the right to intervene in the electoral process (by banning parties or imprisoning leaders) in order to safeguard the alleged common interest. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s such interventions were commonly directed against the left, more recently they have primarily targeted the perceived Islamic threat (e.g. Algeria, Turkey).

In those cases where electoral democracy was introduced or restored after a period of authoritarian rule (as in Turkey in 1950 and again a few years after each military coup; in Indonesia in the early 1950s, to some extent in 1971 and fully again in 1999), Islam became a major factor in the sense that appeals to Muslim sentiment by certain parties could mobilize large numbers of votes. The parties that managed to sweep the Muslim vote in various Muslim countries appear, however, to have little in common, and few of them had an explicitly Islamic political

programme. The so-called Muslim vote has often been a protest vote against the establishment. Islamist parties have generally not been very successful, with the exception of Algeria's FIS and Turkey's Refah Partisi (the advance of both of which was stopped by military intervention).

Even the non-Islamist Muslim parties have been able to gain the support of only a fraction of the committed Muslims. Individual Muslims, but also major Islamic movements have for various reasons preferred to support secular parties. Personal, class or other group interests may be at stake; the movement may wish to alleviate suspicions on the part of the secular (military) establishment or may genuinely believe in a separation of religion from politics; or priority may be given to other ways to gain power or establish a more Islamic society (such as *da'wa*, (general) education, journalism, infiltration of the bureaucracy and the army).

Changes in the nature of Muslim electoral politics may be related to the tremendous demographic and socio-economic developments that all Muslim countries have experienced in the course of the past few decades (although their effects have been far from uniform and by no means easily predictable). Mass literacy and mass education have not only made new forms of mass mobilization possible, but have also facilitated the dissemination of new types of Muslim literature. Rural-to-urban migration brought numerous people into closer physical contact with politics, and to some extent decreased their dependence on traditional relations of power and patronage. Transistors, computers and satellites have completely changed the nature of the public sphere; such media as radio and television, the audio cassette, fax and e-mail have made unprecedented numbers of people informed participants in it. Access to these media, however, although widespread, is essentially unequal, which may introduce new social cleavages or reinforce old ones. Islamists have often been among the first to understand and utilize the possibilities of these new media (and of technology in general), which may have helped them to gain influence at the expense of the ulama. They have, of course, not been the only ones, nor have they been the most successful in utilizing the media; the struggle for control of the media has been part and parcel of the electoral process. ♦

### Papers contributed to the conference:

- James Piscatori (Oxford)  
*The origins and development of the idea of representation and election in the Muslim world' (keynote address)*
- Masykuri Abdullah (Jakarta)  
*'Indonesia's Muslim intellectuals in the 1999 elections'*
- Amiq Ahyad (Surabaya)  
*'The debate in Indonesian Muslim circles on the uses and dangers of Muslim political parties'*
- Burhanettin Duran (Sakarya, Turkey)  
*'Muslim intellectuals, Islamist media and the elections in Turkey'*
- Zoya Hassan (New Delhi)  
*'Muslim discourse on elections in a minority situation: India'*
- William Miles (Boston)  
*'Muslim political discourse and the elections in Nigeria'*
- Menderes Cinar (Ankara)  
*'Why has the Welfare Party failed in Turkey?'*
- Renaud Detalle (Sanaa, Yemen)  
*'Islam and the electoral process in Yemen: the routinization of fitnah?'*
- Thomas Blom Hansen (Copenhagen)  
*'Muslim politics in Mumbai'*
- Mochtar Pabottinggi (Jakarta)  
*'Indonesia's Muslim parties and the recent elections'*
- Hakan Yavuz (Utah)  
*'The Welfare / Virtue Party in Turkey's most recent elections'*
- Raufa Hassan (Sanaa, Yemen and Amsterdam)  
*'Yemeni ulama and their attitudes towards women's participation in elections: experiences of a woman activist'*
- Toyin Falola (Austin, Texas)  
*'Muslim and non-Muslim in the Nigerian elections'*
- Andrée Feillard (Paris)  
*'Responses in military and civilian circles to the recent resurgence of political Islam in Indonesia'*

**Participants in the workshop listen attentively to James Piscatori's opening lecture.**



PHOTO: WIM VREEBURG

Martin van Bruinessen is ISIM Chair at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.  
E-mail: bruines@denicser.jet.uu.nl