

Islam and Democracy in Indonesia and Iran:
A comparative Study

Akhila Kolisetty
09 February 2009
GV310
Lent Term Essay

Democracy is fragile, and in much of the world is shaped by so many factors: economic development, ethnic violence, globalization, and oil wealth. However, one of the most interesting cases is the tenuous relationship between religion and the state. Traditionally, the separation of church and state is regarded a primary factor in terms of fostering democracy. However, many developing countries are striving to redefine democracy by creating a state that follows both the divine law of Islam and the popular rule of democracy. Both Iran and Indonesia are countries with large Muslim populations, and both have experienced struggles within the intersection of Islam and democracy. However, Iran's historical legacy emphasized a political form of Islam, which culminated in an Islamic Republic and the failure of democracy – while Indonesia's strong legacy of civil Islam has led it to consolidate a democracy that acknowledges Islam.

Historical beginnings of Islam

First of all, Iran's historical experience suggests a much more traditional form of Islam than that which is practiced in Indonesia. Iran's cultural and historical legacy laid the foundations for a version of 'fundamentalist' or 'political' Islam – an ideology insisting that Islam is a religion *and* a state. An Islamic state must apply the tenets of Islamic doctrine and *shari'a* (Islamic law) to *all* aspects of social and economic life (Zubaida 1989, 1). The foundations for this unity of state and Islam can be seen in the beginnings of Iran's Islamization. After the Islamic conquest of Persia, Iran was annexed into the Arab Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), followed by the dynastic state of the Abbasids (750-1258). Although at this time, the Caliphs were mostly worldly kings, they were still considered Imams and successors to the Prophet. Thus, they maintained the dominance of Islam and formally enforced and encouraged its observances – through religious functionaries, judges, and the rule of *Shari'a* law (6). Here, we see the beginnings of Islamic theology and law. At that time, theologians and jurists generally accepted an Islamic state, and the *ulama* (Islamic clerics) today hold similar beliefs (4). Additionally, the more 'democratic' institutions of Islam had degenerated into "mere formalities" by the medieval period – not boding well for future democratization. For example, *Shura* (consultation) became practiced as a formality, and *Ijma* (consensus of the community) turned into nothing more than the consensus of the chief *ulama* (5). The early Islamic conquest of Iran

and its lack of democratic principles set the stage for the more political version of Islam in Iran than that practiced in Indonesia.

Indonesia has had a vastly different historical experience with Islam. Indonesia is the fourth most populous nation in the world and the world's largest Muslim majority country. About 88% of Indonesia's population consider themselves Muslim (Hefner 2000, 6). In contrast to the 'political' nature of Islam in Iran, Indonesia's history emphasizes 'civil Islam.' Civil pluralist Islam denies the necessity for an Islamic state, and instead affirms "democracy, voluntarism, and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society" (12). Moreover, Indonesia has always had remarkable political pluralism. In contrast to Iran's legacy of dynastic kings, Indonesia was never "conquered by invading Muslim armies, smothered under a centralized empire, or supervised by an omnipresent clergy" (14). Of course, there were authoritarian rulers at times – but Indonesia's political system was largely made up of a "pluricentric" range of city-states, kingdoms, and tribal regions (14). The colonial era also had a significant impact on the Indonesia's political structure. The Dutch government viewed the Muslim *ulama* as a threat to their power, and thus attempted to stifle political Islam (32). They also placed strict limits on Muslim participation in public affairs, making Muslim leaders more suspicious of the state (15). Colonialism destroyed imperial or political Islam and reinvigorated popular, civil Islam. It increased the tendency of Indonesian Muslim institutions to locate themselves within society and separate themselves from the state (34).

At the same time, Indonesia has rich cultural and religious pluralism. While Iran was taken over and forcefully Islamized, Islam in Indonesia developed more organically and melded with the local culture from the bottom up rather than being enforced from the top down. Indonesia had a legacy of diverse ideas about what it meant to be Muslim, as well as a plural and multiethnic nationalism (Hefner 2000, 14). Before Islam became widespread, Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous religion co-existed in Indonesia (28). Even Javanese Muslims practiced two different versions of Islam. Some practiced a more "normative profession of the faith (*santri*)," while others "spiced their piety with Javanese customs (*abangan*)" (15). In addition, during the struggle for independence, this incredible pluralism led to contradictory viewpoints; many pious Muslims rejected the idea that Islam needed an Islamic state, while others felt that Muslims should have ascended, for the first time, into government. From the start, Islam in Indonesia was more tolerant, being blended with local religions and customs. Overall,

the great cultural, political and religious diversity present in Indonesia laid the foundations for the eventual peaceful coexistence of Islam and democracy.

Civil society and bourgeoisie: the ulama elite v. Muslim associations

Iran's first truly Islamic state was established under the Safavid Dynasty (1500-1722). Throughout the reign of the Safavids, the *ulama* enjoyed high government posts and generous endowments of land, and generally possessed power, wealth, high status, and were closely involved in state institutions (Zubaida 1989, 30). This tradition of economic and political privilege for the *ulama* elite continued under the Qajar dynasty (1796-1926). The *ulama* enjoyed an autonomous base of power, and could speak out against the government whenever the state infringed upon its privileges. Thus, Iran's 'bourgeoisie' was in some sense the *ulama*. Barrington Moore famously stated, "No Bourgeoisie, no democracy" (Moore 1966, 418). However, when the 'bourgeoisie' is not a cadre of businessmen standing to benefit from democracy – but an elite class of conservative *ulama* who have close relationships with the state, are interested in retaining power, and in perpetuating Islam through the state – then political conditions do not seem so favorable for democracy.

In Indonesia, the lack of a strong *ulama* elite and consequently the absence of a close historical relationship between Islam and the state resulted in a civil Islam. Even when most Javanese, Malays, or Minangkabau considered themselves Muslim, neither the courts nor the *ulama* had a monopoly over the practice of Islam. Instead of being concentrated in a strong religious 'bourgeoisie' of sorts, Indonesian Muslims used the diverse channels of civil society and Islamic associations to embrace their faith. Since the arrival of Islam in Indonesia, there have been precedents for power-diffusing associations. In late colonial Indonesia, there were thriving "extra-state Muslim associations;" as the Dutch repressed political Islam, the people began expressing themselves through popular society-based Muslim institutions (Hefner 2000, 35). For instance, *pesantren* were Islamic study centers, which were connected in a "network for native authority apart from the state" (34). This formed the precedent for Muslim institutions that distanced themselves from the state and emphasized self-organization – and over the years, they survived autonomously in this way (35). This precedent for civic associations continued into the post-Suharto era, and still remains strong. Today, one of the most popular organizations is

Muhammadiyah, a leading national modernist and progressive social organization that supports democratization (Collins 2004, 102). Another is Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest traditionalist social organization, which also does not endorse authoritarianism and is open to cooperating with the government (104). Significantly, neither of these most popular Islamic organizations endorses *shari'ah*. More traditionalist and often militant organizations that reject democratization do exist, but they enjoy very narrow bases of support, especially in the more recent open and democratic atmosphere. Overall, Indonesia's historical legacy of a strong civil society rather than a strong *ulama* elite as in Iran has allowed the country to embrace and consolidate democracy in more recent times.

Political responses to collapse of repressive regimes

Both Iran and Indonesia experienced repressive dictatorships; once these regimes were toppled, however, the two countries responded in very different ways to the opened opportunity for a new political system. Iran responded with political Islam, while Indonesia responded with a move towards democratization – and ultimately, both these responses were shaped by their respective historical cultural experiences.

In 1924, Reza Khan overthrew the Qajar Dynasty and named himself Shah; this represented a first step in the formation of a modern state, and the “establishment of centralized state powers and institutions” (Zubaida 1989, 57). Through his repressive regime, he prevented any organized political opposition and undermined the power of the religious sphere (58). However, the power and autonomy of the religious sphere was “not entirely eliminated; they still had the mosques, religious schools, religious charities, and sources of revenue from the contributions of the pious” (57). The Shah's main focus was on economic development, industrialization, and education. Eventually, though, he failed to deliver upon his promises. Under his rule, modernization had progressed so rapidly that there was widespread uneven development, with the rich receiving more benefits and the poor, landless, and ethnic minorities losing out (65). Politically, educated and experienced individuals who were excluded from the political process became discontent with the Shah and demanded participation (67). Moreover, the Shah's long-time suppression of Islamic interests also caused much resentment. Reza Shah

was consequently overthrown, and due in part to Iran's strong historical legacy of political Islam, he was replaced by the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and resulted in the creation of an Islamic state under Ayatollah Khomeini, a prominent cleric who declared himself Supreme Leader. This resurgence of political Islam has a strong historical precedent, as we have seen. Khomeini believed that Islam as a religion *must* include a governmental system. The Islamic Republic is not considered a dictatorship; the leader must rule according to the divine law, and not by his own will. At the same time, it cannot be a democracy or popular republic in which the people rule themselves (Zubaida 1989, 17). Political Islam was accessible to the people because it identified with their historical and cultural roots; it thus garnered some support and became established in the political mainstream (40). Moreover, even under the Shah, the religious sphere had been able to maintain a degree of autonomy and was “well organized, provided with funds, possessed a strong leadership, and [had] a clear strategy” (80). Thus, political Islam's strong historical legacy allowed it to survive the Pahlavi regime. The revolution's Islamic character “did not arise from the religious world views of particular social classes but from the peculiar historical position of the religious institutions in Iran” (80).

Similarly, Indonesia suffered a series of authoritarian leaders. Most significantly, conservative army general Suharto took power and created a “New Order” government in 1956. Under Suharto, there was an effort to “de-Islamicise” the government (Hefner 2000, 16). But as Indonesia experienced an Islamic resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s, Suharto was forced to change his policies to encourage Islam (18). However, Suharto excluded those Muslims he saw as too democratic, or with views too divergent from his own. He wasn't trying to foster a civil Islam – but a regimist one, one that would allow him to garner enough support to maintain power. Finally, in 1998, Muslim and secular democrats joined together in a pro-democracy campaign that toppled Suharto's regime (18). In May 1998, Habibie, a patron of modernist Muslim groups, became President. Habibie's position within the state was fragile, and so he looked to democratization and liberalization as a way to establish a political base. He held a general election in 1999, and many Indonesian Muslims then hoped that Islamic leaders would take this opportunity to finally rise to power (Sidel 2007, 172).

But the results of the 1999 election were wholly unexpected. The Golkar party (the incumbent) obtained 22% of the vote, while numerous Muslim-led parties together won 21%.

The National Awakening Party, led by Abdurrahman Wahid (head of the traditionalist Muslim association, Nahdlatul Ulama) came third with 12.7%. And the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), led by Megawati Soekarnoputri, won a clear plurality of the vote with 34% (172). The results of the election clearly demonstrated great popular support for democracy rather than an Islamist government, and yet again demonstrated the great diversity of beliefs in Indonesia. In order to block secular nationalist Megawati from the Presidency, the main Islamic parties joined together in a Central Axis and supported Wahid as president, forcing Megawati to assume the vice-presidency (Sidel 2007, 202). Over time, the members of the Central Axis could not permanently deny public demands. Megawati eventually replaced Wahid in July 2001, and even the Central Axis began to support her (203). Her rise to presidency demonstrated the triumph of democracy and confirmed the lack of popular support for an Islamic state (204).

There are various reasons for the resurgence of democracy in the wake of Suharto's dictatorship. First, people might have become wary of more extremist points of view and instead support more moderate parties. Perhaps citizens simply continued to vote generally – but not exclusively – along *aliran* (socio-cultural identities) lines (Aspinall 2005, 149). It is also very likely that the electoral process fragmented the more extremist Islamic groups and caused them to lose support (151). Finally, one of the most important factors certainly remains Indonesia's historical cultural legacy. Indeed, the considerable autonomy of associational life and the great plurality long found in the Indonesian Islamic community resulted in less support for Islamist groups and greater support for moderate, democratic groups. Indonesia's legacy of civil Islam had paved the road for democracy – while Iran, in the face of a similar opportunity, chose the Islamic state.

Despite widespread support for democracy in Indonesia, there *has* been considerable religious violence in the country that has created doubts about the durability of the country's democracy. From 1995 to 2005, religious violence changed in nature from religious riots to interreligious pogroms, to Jihad or bombings by armed groups (Sidel 2007, 137). Religious violence narrowed over time from the large-scale collective violence of riots and pogroms to the terrorist activity of Jihad. Earlier on when Islam was repressed by the state, there was greater violence in defense of Islam; as democratization progressed and Islam became accepted, religious violence stopped enjoying popular support and became a tool of extremist groups. Ultimately, religious violence never posed a serious threat to democracy, as it involved relatively

small portions of the population; the majority of the population did have a tendency to support democracy.

Iran's continued struggle with democracy; Indonesia's consolidation

In Iran, 1989 saw Khomeini's death and Rafsanjani's election as President. The Rafsanjani presidency attempted to "graft the vision of a modern state to the body politic of the Islamic Republic," while ignoring the divergence between the goals of Islamic ideology and those of the modern state. Rafsanjani failed to appease both the conservative *ulama* and civil society – because their demands simply proved to be incompatible (Gheissari 2006, 127). In 1997, Khatami was surprisingly elected President. He ran on a reformist platform and supported a more tolerant and humanistic interpretation of Islam in contrast to the traditional clerical leadership. He promised social change, cultural freedom, and a relaxing of the "state's ideological vigilance" (130). Consequently, Khatami appealed to a broad cross-section of the population – especially women, youth, intellectuals, civil society, and secular voters – many who became more active in the political process for the first time (131). Shockingly, he won the election with 70% of the vote (129). Because of its impressive voter turnout, the election legitimized the pro-democracy movement, and demonstrated the public's clear interest in reform.

However, Khatami was unable to push through his reforms during his two-term presidency (1997-2005). His goal was to create a middle-class-based and politically democratic Islamic republic. But he was unable to do so within the framework of the Islamic Republic, which in itself is profoundly undemocratic. The very constitutional power structure of the Islamic Republic is not conducive to reform from within. For instance, the unelected Supreme Leader has vast power and is responsible for ensuring that all actions taken by the government comply with *shari'a*. And although there is an elected Parliament, the unelected Council of Guardians can determine whether each law passed is in accordance with Islam (Buchta 2000, 8). The Islamic Republic maintains a façade of a democracy, but in reality the unelected undemocratic elements within the government (e.g. Supreme Leader, Guardian Council) can choose to interpret *shari'a* however they desire, make all final decisions, and are not subject to any democratic checks or balances (Masroori 2007, 175). The Islamic Republic, is then not a democracy at all, and has "ingrained authoritarian tendencies" (Gheissari 2006, 141). Moreover,

the Islamic Republic places sovereignty in God and divine law rather than in the people; by placing the notion of “guardianship” over civil society, it considers Iranians subjects rather than citizens (141). Democratization, which places sovereignty in the hands of the people, directly counters the constitutional foundation of the Islamic republic. Therefore, as he attempted to integrate his democratic reforms into the fabric of the Islamic Republic, Khatami was constantly thwarted by the conservatives, who saw such reforms as harmful to their interests and denied his reforms under the pretense of maintaining *shari’a* (140). Conservatives had effectively used “state institutions to resist thoroughgoing change” (140).

If Khatami had truly wanted to implement his reforms, he would have had to change the Constitution itself. But because he too fundamentally believed that Iranian identity was in part Islamic, he shied away from openly defying the ideological core of the Islamic Republic (Gheissari 2006, 139). He refused to be so radical as to change the constitution or challenge the Supreme Leader, and he essentially accepted his weakened role within the government rather than leading a popular movement for reform (129). He became, merely, a figurehead – and his followers lost hope that the Islamic Republic could be reformed from within. Thus, Khatami’s presidency represented not the strengthening of democracy through popular participation – but the further alienation of democracy by the state. In 2004, conservatives regained control of parliament by using the Guardian Council to disqualify most reformist candidates (141). And now, a century after the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, the struggle to balance an Islamic Republic with a true democracy continues on in Iran; the conflict has never been resolved, and democracy remains threatened.

On the other hand, democracy has been consolidated in Indonesia. Megawati was not a champion of Islamization, but a representative of pluralist Indonesian Islam (Sidel 2007, 202). Megawati’s party, the Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (PDI-P) has an ideology based on the multi-faith Pancasila, Indonesia’s official philosophy (207). Pancasila is made up of five major principles: belief in one supreme God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, consultative democracy, and social justice for the Indonesian people (Indonesia 1993). Thus, the Indonesian people have found a happy balance in a democratic polity that includes Islam and has a strong nationalist foundation, and that builds upon Indonesia’s rich legacy of religious and cultural plurality. Indonesia has been able to consolidate its democracy because of its more

modernist version of Islam as compared to that practiced in Iran, and its long historical legacy of pluralism in religion, politics, and civil society.

Ultimately, both Indonesia and Iran have had to struggle with authoritarian rulers and work to create a proper balance between Islam and democracy. However, Iran's historical legacy – including Islamization from above, the presence of a strong *ulama* elite, and the absence of religious, cultural, and political pluralism – caused it to veer towards political Islam that insists on an Islamic state. On the other hand, Indonesia's history of pluralism and a strong civil society led to civil Islam, with Islam remaining within society. These vastly divergent historical experiences with Islam have led the two countries to respond differently to opportunities for democratization. Due to its legacy of political Islam, Iran reacted to the end of Reza Shah's regime with an Islamic Republic that prioritized Islam and *shari'a* first and democracy second. And due to its history of civil Islam, Indonesia reacted to the end of Suharto's regime by instituting a pluralist democracy that acknowledged Islam, but did not prioritize it. Historical legacies, then, play a large role in shaping the nature of religion, culture, and finally democracy in each country, and can help us discover vital patterns in democracy and democratization throughout the world.

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