



Contributors

Tom Plate: A huge Muslim democracy

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BALI, Indonesia

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There may be a quiet one in the making here that almost no one knows about, aside from the immediate — and immediately affected — neighbors. And it's an important story right now at this early stage, even if the political tale's ending cannot honestly be forecast.

The plot revolves around Indonesia, which many Western tourists know best as the country that houses Bali, one of the most gorgeous places. That it does, but it also houses more Muslims than anywhere as well.

But wait a minute: a fledgling democracy flowering in the largest Islamic country? Isn't Islam utterly incompatible with democracy? How can this be?

Interested observers can hardly get a better answer than one provided by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the elected president of what in fact is our third-largest democracy, after India and the U.S.: "In Indonesia, democracy, Islam and modernity go hand-in-hand, effortlessly together," he insisted, in a major speech. "Rather than becoming a bastion of radicalism, the heart and soul of Indonesia remains moderate and progressive."

A former general himself, "SBY," as is his nickname, proffered that optimism in the course of accepting a "Democracy Award" honoring the country's 240-plus million citizens for pushing democracy forward. He told cheering delegates at the International Association of Political Consultants (celebrating the organization's 40th annual conference) that democracy was here to stay in Indonesia.

In 2004, when Indonesia offered national elections that included the first direct election of the president, about 80 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. This was not just a high turnout, this was a political revolution. "For many decades," the tall, solidly built president explained, "Indonesian politics gravitated around the elite. Indonesians have complained about feudalistic tendencies in our political culture. This elitism is unhealthy for our democracy."

The president admitted that democracy all by itself will not satisfy the people if it fails to deliver economic improvement: "When people cast their ballot, they do so with the intention of improving their lives. . . . Democracy must be a process of fulfillment of that hope."

For its plain-speaking and evident optimism, the president's address won over the convention's delegates and lifted them to a standing ovation. But in this region it has been the fast track of authoritarianism that has been more closely associated with prosperity. Neighboring Singapore and Malaysia are two economically successful nations that cannot be described as classically democratic in the Western sense. At the same time, democracies in other parts of the world (the U.S., Scandinavia, etc.) that are deemed to be world-class, have also been associated with good governance as well as economic achievement. There are not a whole lot of such democracies to be found in this neighborhood.

So, how will Muslim Indonesia ultimately turn out? SBY asks us to avoid pessimism while remaining grounded: "It is critical to remember that democracy cannot be taken for granted. There are many cases in the world where democracy falters, stagnates, decays, crumbles or reverses itself. . . . And like all processes of change, [transition to] democracy is bound to be rife with endless criticism, occasional self-doubt, stubborn resistance, and numerous hurdles."

The truth is, democracy-doubt is not confined to Southeast Asia. People in the West can find their ideological faith tested. Turnout at elections is often low; campaigns are generally dreary; the quality of the debate generally hovers on the intellectual level of used-car advertisements. Prosperity defuses the irritation but economic downturn can resurface old anxieties.

The United States, for its part, faces the certainty of a presidential election next year amid the distinct possibility of a significant economic downturn. To use SBY's terms, then, we may face the prospect of political stagnation along with decay of the political spirit. It is then that U.S. democracy will be hard-tested. All democracies, as well as authoritarian regimes, look good when the economy is good. It is when things go sour that the resilience of a political system reveals itself.

"In the final analysis," said SBY, "democratic transition is not a linear process where you go in a straight line from A to Z. In many cases, it is a stop-go process rife with ups and downs, and shocks and jolts."

For decades after independence from the Dutch, the political system of the giant archipelago known as Indonesia was an authoritarian one. It was only in 1999 that the new electoral system was born. That's not much time to get democracy right, but it can't hurt to have a democratic leader with maturity and vision to fight against pessimism while keeping expectations realistic and hope alive. Right now, Indonesia would seem to have that kind of leader.

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