

International Conference in Jakarta

Beyond Elections: Islam and Political Parties in Southeast Asia

Organized by the Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World
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Dr. H.M. Hidayat Nur Wahid

Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR)
Republic of Indonesia

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Bismillah Hirrahmanirrahim

Assalamualaikum Wr Wb

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Community
Distinguished Guests from our neighboring countries and beyond
My fellow Indonesians
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honor to be with you today to address such a distinguished audience. I am particularly honored to participate in this conference because I believe that Islam and democracy will be a defining issue for now and the future. And I honor the Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World which is playing an important role in encouraging the development of democracy in Islam.

The challenge is that so many believe that the two are in basic conflict. We believe however that democracy goes to the roots of Islam. I would like to describe three aspects of these roots.

The first aspect is the Islamic view of humankind. It is a view that humanizes humans. Humans were created as men and women, not with original sin, nor as members of a favorite nation of God. While Islam prepares humans for another life, its main concern is to make them capable of living in this life.

In addition, Islam's view of humankind is universal in spirit. It accepts the Jewish and Christian prophets, for example Abraham, the father of the Arabs and the Jews. It shares the history, the basic ethics, above all the belief in the One God, with Jews and Christians. The scriptures of the Jews and Christians are mentioned as divinely revealed books in Islam's own sacred book, the Qur'an.

The second aspect is the principle of learning. The Qur'an encourages Muslims to learn and to acquire knowledge from whatever source, regardless of race, ethnicity or nationality. The Prophet Mohammad said "Learning is an obligation for every Muslim, male or female." Throughout the history of Islam, various ethnic, racial and religious groups shared in the search for knowledge.

The third aspect is the moral system of Islam that encourages wisdom and not egoism. Islam includes all the commonly accepted moral rules but the teaching of morality is more practical than theoretical- through example and by modeling moral behavior. The prophet Mohammad is the prime exemplar. Let me now talk about the consequences of the above three Islamic aspects that are relevant to democracy.

The first consequence is egalitarianism and tolerance. As the Qur'an declares:

We have created you from the same male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another...The noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the best in conduct. Qur'an 49:13

The Medina Charter, written by the Prophet Mohammad for the multi-religious city-state of Medina, can lay claim to being the first written constitution in the world. Yet it is modern in that it gave equal rights to every citizen in a plural society, and giving them a say in governmental matters. One clause of the Charter guaranteed the right of the various communities to practice its own religion.

Finally, in the Prophet Mohammad's last sermon delivered on the Ninth Day of Dhul-Hijjah 10 A.H. in the Uranah valley of Mount Arafat in Mecca, he underlined the tolerant and egalitarian spirit of Islam:

"...All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab, also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white-except by piety and good action"

The Medina Charter and the above statements have direct implications for the development of democracy.

A second consequence is the democratic principle of *Shura* in Islam. *Shura* is one of the four main principles, along with justice, equality, and human dignity, of political organization in Islam. *Shura* is based on three perspectives. One is that all persons in a society are equal in human and civil rights. A second is that the majority view is best in deciding public issues. Indeed, one of the clauses of the Medina Charter, Clause 37(a) ensures consultation with the people in all matters. The third is that justice, equality and human dignity can best be obtained through *shura* governance.

At the root of Islam governance is the idea of *ummah* or nation. The *ummah* has a common moral outlook and does not recognize differences in race, territory or nation. The *ummah* of Islam includes the entire Muslim population on earth as well as those non-Muslim living in peace with Islam.

Finally, a third consequence is that of moderation. According to Islam, humans are neither angels nor devils. They should not be materialistic or ascetics. Neither should they be on the far ends of individualism and collectivism. Islam rejects all extremes, whether in the form of consumerism or terrorism. At the same time, Islam encourages a democracy that can protect the weak and poor as well as it produces economic growth. The moderation of Islam and its promise of a more spiritual society can contribute to an alternative future in the 21st century that balances social welfare with economic prosperity.

What I have just stated is of course very familiar to this distinguished audience. I hope you will not mind my summarizing what can only be a reminder for many of you. But it is also a reminder that the Platform for Democratic Governance-of Tolerance, Justice and

Participation-that was approved at the last conference of the Congress in Istanbul is very much part of the basis of Islam.

Let me now touch upon the specific theme of the conference - that of Islam and Political Parties in Asia - by talking about the present Indonesian experience.

That experience began with the constitutional reforms since 1999. The reforms made the mandate of the people the highest authority in the land, rather than the MPR as it was before. That also meant the inclusion of many more parties in the election process. In addition, it included all citizens in the first ever direct election of president and vice president.

The MPR's power has been lessened but it still has powers to amend the constitution, to inaugurate the president and to impeach the president. Its mandate also lies in its composition-the House of Representatives (DPR) consisting of party members indirectly elected and the new 'Senate' or Dewan Perwakilan Daerah (DPR) members who are directly elected and are not associated with political parties. We have also had the first direct elections of regional governments. These direct elections will contribute to national leadership and will mean that democracy has reached the regions. It will be a long process but we expect that it will result in minimizing the issues of terrorism and fundamentalism-both of which arises from being excluded from democratic processes. We hope there will also be the direct elections to democratize the House of Representatives (DPR) whose members are now indirectly elected through the political parties.

The new Indonesian democracy made it possible for a small Islamic party like the one I helped to establish, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), to gain influence by running under a platform of anti-corruption, transparency and public service. It is a grass roots organization that focuses on the universal values of Islam. We coexist with the people of different religions, races and ethnic groups. In this respect, the PKS promotes the adoption of the "Medina Charter" instead of the Jakarta Charter. The Jakarta Charter is the term used for the proposed additional words in the Constitution that would have required Muslims to follow Islamic law.

The PKS won about 7 percent of the electoral votes, which under current regulations allow it to run candidates for the presidential race. We chose not to do so, but with the support of small parties, I was elected to be chairman of the MPR, despite facing a candidate supported by the larger parties. After being elected, to set an example of good governance, I resigned as party chairman. While this is normal practice in most countries to avoid conflict of interest, the normal practice for a party chairman in Indonesia is to retain the position after gaining public office.

We believe the moral authority gained through such actions can be helpful in fighting the most pressing problem in Indonesia today-, which is corruption at all levels of our society. Other institutions in our new democracy, such as a free press and a flourishing

NGO sector can help to prevent corruption. But in our society leading by example plays a big role in the fight against corruption.

To play a positive role in the new democracy, political parties themselves should practice democracy. For example, the PKS itself has to be free of corruption to retain and increase its electoral performance. While we are not perfect, we have strict party rules and sanctions that relate to corruption that we do not hesitate to enforce.

Another aspect of our party that is new in Indonesian political practices is the relative large proportion of women in our party and who have been elected as legislative members. We hope our efforts can be a role model for other Indonesian organizations so that they too can follow the new politics of democracy. One indicator of our success is that we have party members in East Indonesia who are not Muslims but who decided to join us because they agreed with our vision of corruption-free Indonesia.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me now conclude by emphasizing two challenges that hope this conference will take up. The first is the aspect of an inclusive democracy. We need a dialogue with those who do not necessarily share our views and to allow them to participate in the democratic process. These include those in Islam and those of other faiths. I hope that in future conferences, you can find a way to include those with differing views to take part in the dialogue.

The other challenge is the democratic processes in our political parties. How can we work for democracy if our own parties do not reflect democracy in their internal management? I hope that by sharing the PKS struggles in this respect, we can contribute in a small way towards a “best practice” of democratic political parties.

Finally, let me share my belief that the new democracy in Indonesia presents the best hope of moving to an Indonesia where social justice prevails. Only through developing this democracy can we hope to be a model for others.

Thank you very much. I wish you a very productive conference.

Assalamualaikum Wr Wb