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[Indonesia's election a triumph of pragmatism over ideology, moderate Muslims over radical Islamists](#)

By [Michael Allen](#) on April 24, 2009

The results of this month's legislative [elections in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation](#) are not due until May 9. But it is already clear that Indonesia's 100 million voters demonstrated a markedly pragmatic, non-ideological approach to politics, not least in delivering "devastating setbacks" to Islamist parties:

In broad brush strokes, what this election thus suggests about Indonesian society is that the emotional draw of ideology, religion, charismatic leadership, and social controversy has begun to decline as concerns about good governance, fiscal accountability, and government professionalism have risen. The problem that Indonesia faces no longer stems from its past social and cultural divisions. Rather, the danger at hand reflects the fragmentation of a political elite that has yet to understand the interests of voters while failing to grasp the nature of the new democratic playing field.

Analyst Richard Kraince suggest that politicians' reactions to likely losses and to some "grave errors" by the National Election Commission will demonstrate whether "[Indonesian exceptionalism](#)" is as robust as it seems or whether the archipelago's democracy will go the way of some of its dysfunctional neighbors.

The election results confirm that [Islam and democracy are compatible](#), writes Ahmad Suaedy, executive director of Jakarta's Wahid Institute. The radical Islamist parties failed because "exclusive Islamic ideologies are no longer able to meet the needs of those concerned about the existence of such Islamic parties or of those who still place hopes in the promise that ideological realization can change Indonesian state foundations."

Yet others remain concerned that as [talks to form a governing coalition](#) continue, the mainstream parties may be tempted to strike a deal with the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) which, though ostensibly non-violent, espouses an intolerant brand of Islam, informed by Wahhabi ideology, at odds with Indonesia's syncretic civil Islam. [Sadanand Dhume](#) cites the "[pathbreaking](#)" new report by the [Libforall Foundation](#) which, he notes, demonstrates that the "PKS continues its effort to [infiltrate mainstream Islamic organizations](#), and to replace Indonesia's tolerant, homespun Islam with an arid import from the Middle East."

The [Libforall Foundation](#) is one of the rare success stories of an initiative in which moderate and liberal Muslims - too often the silent and disorganized majority - have organized effectively to counter radical Islamist groups by promoting democracy and tolerance. "Truth, which is not organized, can be readily defeated by evil that is," former Indonesian President H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid in the Libforall report, [The Illusion of an Islamic State: the Expansion of Transnational Islamist Movements to Indonesia](#).

The elections confirm the country's potential as a standard-bearer for liberal democratic ideas in a region where it has recently appeared fragile and in which China represents a significant authoritarian countervailing power. "If Indonesia was to start [investing in the propagation of these ideas](#), it could contribute to regional peace and security," notes one observer, citing as a positive sign President Yudho-yono's launch of the [Bali Democracy Forum](#) "aimed at enshrining democracy on the strategic agenda of Asia".