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Indonesia's Political Landscape Offers Path for Egypt

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JAKARTA — For a force seen by many as a fifth column of creeping Islamism, the national congress last year of the Prosperous Justice Party, an ideological descendant of Egypt's [Muslim Brotherhood](#), was heavy on reassuring symbolism.

Uniformed party cadres filled the immaculate halls of the Ritz Carlton's ballroom in Jakarta. The congress was the largest and flashiest to date, and appeared calculated to show that a new moderate party had truly arrived. Among the keynote speakers was Cameron Hume, then the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, who praised the party, known as the PKS, for its commitment to democracy.

The contrast with U.S. policy in the Middle East at the time was striking. In Egypt, the United States was backing and funding the regime of [Hosni Mubarak](#), which, while unofficially tolerating the Muslim Brotherhood, hobbled it politically and maintained a formal ban. Meanwhile in Jakarta, the U.S. envoy was at a ballroom of an American hotel chain, attending the coming-out party of an Indonesian movement that, with a few key differences, draws on the Brotherhood for both its ideology and its organization.

As Western leaders uneasily question what role the Brotherhood will play in Egypt following Mr. Mubarak's overthrow last week, some observers say the PKS offers a telling comparison. Among analysts, the divide over Indonesia's example is strikingly similar: between those who believe the Brotherhood's brand of Islamism can be tamed by democracy, and those who think it will be democracy's undoing.

"I think we need to be cautious about overdrawing the parallels, but nonetheless if you get a democratic system in Egypt, some of the same imperatives will apply there as here," said Greg Fealy, an expert on Indonesian political Islam from the Australian National University.

"And that is if parties want to bring significant change to their societies they'll have to have political power. And to have political power they have to have votes from the mainstream," he said.

Following the 1998 overthrow of the dictator [Suharto](#), Indonesia looked a lot like Egypt now. Popular anger over corruption and economic misery in a predominantly Muslim

nation had undone a three-decade military-backed dictatorship that was, for the most part, friendly to the West and hostile to political Islam.

As new political forces sprang up with the lifting of Suharto's repression, once-clandestine student groups drawing on the Brotherhood's methods and ideology evolved into the Justice Party, which later became the PKS. Like the Brotherhood, the movement organizes its members into tightly knit study groups, known as usrah.

The Justice Party was formed on the basis of the Brotherhood's five-point founding credo, which includes a call for the Koran to form the basis of law. Responding to fears that the party holds a secret agenda to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state, the PKS has dropped the credo from its party platform, and it is now officially open to non-Muslims. Party cadres at the grass roots, however, continue to base their activities on Brotherhood principles.

PKS is not the only Islamic party in Indonesia, but of all parties, religious and secular, it is widely acknowledged as the most organized, sophisticated and slick. Euphoria after a strong showing in national elections in 2004 led to predictions — matched by panic from liberals — that the party would gain as much as 20 percent of the vote by the next round in 2009.

That did not come to pass, and the party's support leveled off at less than 8 percent, the fourth-highest of any party, amid an overall slump in support for Islam-based parties. Despite this, the party has managed to secure four seats in the cabinet of President [Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#).

The party's clout on some issues is easy to see. The PKS was a key force behind a draconian 2008 anti-pornography law that religious minorities and liberals call an Islamist attack on personal freedom and religious harmony. Last year, the communications minister, Tifatul Sembiring, a PKS politician, pushed through a nationwide, albeit ineffective, online pornography filter.

But what the party has not done is call for turning Indonesia into an Islamic state, for the simple reason that Indonesian voters would reject it, said Anis Matta, the secretary general of PKS. Replacing Indonesia's nonsectarian Constitution with a Shariah state "is not under debate in the PKS anymore," Mr. Matta said.

"We've entered into democracy as the best frame for us. We believe in democracy, we're working in the system and working within the system's demands, which includes making compromises," Mr. Matta said. The party has trimmed back its expectations of voter support while moderating its platform, he said, and expects just over 10 percent of the vote in national elections in 2014.

"Democracy exists because of compromise, especially in a country as big as Indonesia," Mr. Matta said. "I think in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt it's going to be the same thing."

Of course, Egypt and Indonesia are very different countries. Whereas Egypt's Brotherhood was the largest broad-based opposition force during decades of authoritarian rule, Indonesia under Suharto had an organized secular opposition with popular appeal, said Azyumardi Azra, director of the graduate school at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta. And even among Islamic opponents, relative moderates predominated. On top of that, the PKS and Indonesian Muslims in general are less prone to extremism than their co-religionists in the Middle East, Mr. Azra said.

In Indonesia's current political environment, the PKS is one of a slew of Islamic parties, and it has often been less prone to pushing a narrow religious agenda — like Shariah-inspired local laws — than have other players, including opportunistic members of notionally secular parties, Mr. Azra said.

This does not assuage the PKS's critics. With its tight internal organization, the PKS is as much a social movement as a political party, said C. Holland Taylor, the Jakarta-based chairman of LibForAll Foundation, which promotes moderate Islam worldwide. As such, Mr. Taylor said, the party has been a key factor in the rise of a more austere, intolerant form of Islam in Indonesia. This has already been reflected in legislation like the anti-pornography law, he said.

"If you're a citizen of a country and your government is promulgating laws that deny you freedom and is using the repressive apparatus of the state to enforce those laws, the government is more dangerous than some random terrorist that's never going to reach you personally," Mr. Taylor said.

Party leaders have also often been less than liberal in their public utterances. After two separate attacks last week by Muslim mobs, in which three members of the minority Ahmadi sect were killed and churches torched, a number of PKS leaders said the attackers had been "provoked" by acts of blasphemy.

Eva Kusuma Sundari, a lawmaker for the secular Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, said it was only a matter of time before the PKS showed its true face.

"I think they're lying," she said. "Even though on the surface they say that they're a middle party, they say they're pro-pluralism, somehow I agree with the warning from people, especially my friends from the Middle East, that this is an undemocratic institution using democratic ways and democratic discourses to get into power.

"But once they're in power, they will not exercise democratic values."

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