Indonesia Rejects Extremism

By Sadanand Dhume

Against a backdrop of Korean missile launches and violent protests in Thailand, those looking for a spot of calm in Asia may alight on an unlikely candidate: Indonesia. Largely peaceful parliamentary elections last week—the third consecutive free elections since the end of Gen. Suharto’s 32-year rule in 1998—reflect the strides made by a country that not so long ago was in danger of becoming a byword for chaos and random violence.

Most heartening of all has been the Indonesian electorate’s affirmation of its legendary moderation. The top three parties in the incoming parliament—President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Democratic Party, former president Megawati Sukarnoputri’s left-leaning Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, and Suharto’s former political machine, Golkar—are all nonsectarian.

They stand for the country’s founding ideology, the live-and-let-live doctrine of Pancasila, and draw their supporters from each of the country’s five major faiths. Mr. Yudhoyono, known as the “gentle general” for his military past and avuncular manner, is the overwhelming favorite to win July’s presidential election.

Islam-based parties saw their cumulative vote-share shrink to about 20% from 38% five years ago. Take the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)—Indonesia’s version of the Muslim Brotherhood—which seeks to institute Shariah law. In the outgoing parliament, PKS and the Democrat Party were virtually tied; in the new parliament the president’s party, which deftly stole PKS’s signature issue, a promise of graft-free governance, will seat about three times as many members.

Islam-based parties saw their vote total cut in half.

Five years ago, when the Democratic Party won only 7% of the parliamentary vote, Mr. Yudhoyono was forced to rely on PKS support in parliament. This time around he can exclude PKS from the governing coalition and deny it the chance to grow under the umbrella of state power. Nevertheless, while PKS is down, it is still the fourth-largest party in parliament, thanks to the decline of other Islam-oriented parties. It controls several important governorships, including those of the populous provinces of West Java and North Sumatra.

In the short term, striking a deal with PKS may be expedient—it’s natural for any politician to eye the party’s disciplined voter base. But in the long term, as the experience of Pakistan and Sudan shows, trucking with Islamists is a high-risk gamble. A pathbreaking new report by the Liberty Foundation, an anti-extremist nonprofit co-founded by former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, notes that 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.

It will take much more than a single election to dent PKS’s access to Saudi funding and its network of supportive mosques and madrasas, or to diminish the appeal for many newly educated Indonesians of its starkly utopian message: Islam is the solution.

Since it first burst into prominence five years ago, PKS has done little to dispel fears that it is the dark bloom at the heart of Indonesia’s democratic flowering. Party leaders are outspoken supporters of Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual head of Jemaah Islamiyah, the terrorist group responsible for suicide bombing in Bali that killed hundreds. Last year, PKS piloted through parliament a harsh antipornography bill that legalizes vigilante violence and forces non-Islamic communities to conform to conservative Islamic norms.

The party’s attitudes toward women’s rights are captured by its obsession with dress codes and outspoken support for polygamy. In a country long famous for a pragmatic foreign policy, PKS makes emotive appeals to pan-Islamic causes such as Palestine. Among the party rank and file, 9/11 conspiracy theories, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism are rampant.

If Indonesia is to fulfill its potential as a moderate and modern Muslim-majority democracy, mainstream politicians must not make the mistake of legitimizing this party. In the short term, this means scotching rumors that the PKS may snag the vice-presidential spot on President Yudhoyono’s ticket.

In the long term, it means recognizing the sobering reality that Indonesia’s long struggle with radical Islam is not about to end any time soon. That struggle will be won not by embracing PKS, but by working to banish it to the margins of political life, where it belongs.

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