Islam vs Secularism: The New Political Terrain in Malaysia and Indonesia

The political drama in the Malay archipelago continues to be played out in terms of the traditional Malay-Indonesian shadow theatre: the Wayang of Kera-jean. But it is now possible to deny that the latest developments in Malaysia and Indonesia have also marked a major shift in the political terrain of the two countries, with the Islamist parties and movements who once poised to enter the charmed circle of kera-jean politics once again. This is something to which both the governments and the intellectual communities of the region can no longer indifferent.

The results of the recent Indonesian elections were quite surprising for many observers of Indonesian politics. Up to the last minute, there were those who felt that victory for either the liberal democratic Megawati Sukarnoputri or the conservative B.J. Habibie was certain. It was expected that the Muslims in the middle would have made strong gains, and that popular Muslim leaders like Abdullah Ahmad Wahid and Amien Rais would eventually rise to take up the role of kingmakers in the new government. But few could have guessed that the mantle of the state would fall onto the leader of the Nahdul Ulama, one of the two biggest Islamist movements in Indonesia, Abdullahul Wahid himself.

Observers, experts and laymen alike, are now stunned to give adequate answers and explanations for this radical turn in Indonesian politics. In 1998, the Indonesian state has tried to ensure that Islamist organizations and parties would never be allowed to mobilize strongly enough to be able to challenge the status quo. But this time, when these Islamist parties have effectively placed itself on the political map of Malaysia as the main opposition party in the country, brushing aside the liberal and leftist alternatives, the DAP, PRM and PKN. The Islamist discourse that PAS espouses has become a matter of political discourse in the country, and the political leader of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, himself. It was clear that the powers-that-be in Jakarta could not afford to neglect the powers-that-be in Jakarta.

The Malay and the Chinese, the two biggest Islamic movements in Indonesia, have been trampled on by the political elite based in Jakarta. The signs were there for those who were able to see them: from the late 1980s, the Indonesian elite began to accommodate changes in the public mood. The government opened up Islamic think-tanks, research centres and conferences. It was clear that the power that be in Jakarta could not afford to neglect the demands of this massive constituency outside the corridors of power. And when Amien Rais declared that he and his movement, the Muhammadijah, would no longer support the Suharto government, it became clear to all that the Islamic consensus had been broken and that the Islamic movements were no longer going to tolerate the excessive stranglehold of the Suharto clique. The rest is history.

Today in neighbouring Malaysia, a similar scenario is unfolding. After decades of uninterrupted rule, the Malaysian government which is made up of the ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional) alliance, is suffering from the Conservative Nationalist UMNO (United Malaysia National Organisation) party, is facing the worst crisis in its history.

The biggest gains in the 1999 Malaysian election (though not necessarily in terms of parliamentary seats) were made by the Islamic opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). PAS has been the main nemesis of UMNO since the 50s, and its tactic has been to take the Malay swing away from UMNO and PNC. The cost of failure will be in Jakarta could not afford to neglect the demands of this massive constituency outside the corridors of power. When Dr. Amien Rais declared that he and his movement, the Muhammadijah, would no longer support the Suharto government, it became clear to all that the Islamic consensus had been broken and that the Islamic movements were no longer going to tolerate the excessive stranglehold of the Suharto clique. The rest is history.

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