Islam and the Electoral Process: An International Conference

Indonesia experienced its first free elections since 1955, and a wide range of parties took part. In the move to elections, the country was afflicted by a series of violent conflicts that often took the form of Muslim-Christian clashes. The leaders of Indonesia’s major Islamic organizations, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais, played central roles in the transition to the post-Sukarno era. Both, however, to style themselves as national rather than Muslim leaders. The political parties with which they are most closely associated are secular parties that attracted also non-Muslim voters. The explicitly Muslim parties polled considerably less strongly than had been expected.

The 1999 elections in Turkey indicated that the apparently irresistible rise of the Islamic Virtue (Fazilet) Party, has been brought to a halt. The ‘silent coup’ of February 1997, by which the military leadership forced the prime minister Erdogan to resign, and the repressive anti-Islamist policies of the following years have not led to greater numbers of pro-Islamic protest votes. Many of those who voted for the Islamic party in the past appear to have voted for conservative or ultra-nationalist parties this year.

In Nigeria, where Muslims make up about half the population, none of the candidates in the 1999 presidential elections were Muslim. Nonetheless, Islam did play an important role in the election of the prime minister Buhari to power, and the repressive anti-Islamist policies of the following years have not led to greater numbers of pro-Islamic protest votes. Many of those who voted for the Islamic party in the past appear to have voted for conservative or ultra-nationalist parties this year.

The aim of the Islam and the Electoral Process conference was to highlight the various modalities of the democratic process and the place of Muslim political behaviour in it through comparisons between countries and by a juxtaposition of different perspectives on the electoral process. In order to broaden the range of comparison, two other countries where elections took place in 1999 were added: Yemen, which is practically 100% Muslim, and India, where the Muslims constitute a minority.

For each country, two to four scholars were invited to contribute papers on different aspects of the electoral process. The papers were grouped not by country but in three broad thematic categories:

1. Political thought and ideology (for the panel entitled ‘Expressing Islam’)
2. The responses of other political actors (nearly the military, but also civilian non-Muslims and secularist politicians) to Islamic political activity (for the panel entitled ‘Disarming Islam’).
3. The role of Islam, and the role of the Islamic political parties, in the 1999 elections (for the panel entitled ‘Empowering Islam’).

The conference was opened with a keynote speech by Professor James Piscatori (Oxford) on the origins and development of Islam’s political thought. Tracing the historical dialectic between effective elitism and democratic populism, and morphing in one form or another, the concept of democracy has - at least in principle - found almost universal acceptance in the Muslim world, this introduction provided an excellent backdrop to the entire conference. Each of the contributions illustrated how Muslim thinkers and activists to concrete situations Muslim politics tends to be.

Electoral Politics

In most electoral democracies, the vote of the electorate proxies in national and international politics as that of a secular nationalist intellectual, a Marxist ideologist, or a learned religious scholar. A single woman’s vote, moreover, is assigned as much as that of any man, and an unbeliever’s equals that of a pious Muslim. Much as democracy may be applauded in principle, all elites are conscious of the act of voting as a formality. The voting of the masses has been notoriety not out of step with the wishes of those ideologists. Understandably, the purveyors of ideology should expect that the masses would be suspicious of the masses whom they claim to represent, and they are often inclined to reserve privileged roles for ideological avant-gardes – a concept that appears to be incompatible with ‘one person, one vote’ democracy.

Some attitudes of Islamists, thinkers and activists towards the established democratic process have ranged from an aversion to this or that aspect of the existing system and its values, through aloofness or pragmatism, to a wholehearted endorsement of politics, in which the act of voting is seen as an affirmation of religious commitment. Periods in which elections and parliamentary politics were seen as the main avenue towards desired changes have alternated with periods of disarray and disappointment with this particular form of mobilization.

Military elites in most Muslim countries have had, at best, ambivalent attitudes towards the mass mobilization taking place in the electoral process. They too have claimed to represent the real interests of the entire nation and have arrogated themselves the right to intervene in the electoral process (by banning parties or imprisoning leaders) in order to safeguard the alleged common interest. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s such interventions were commonly directed against the left, more recently they have primarily targeted the perceived Islamic threat (e.g. Algeria, Turkey) in order to safeguard the alleged common interest. In those cases where electoral democracy was introduced or restored after a period of authoritarian rule (as in Turkey since 1950, and again a few years after each military coup; in Indonesia in the early 1950s, to some extent in 1971 and fully again in 1999), Islam became a major factor in the sense that appeals to Muslims sentiment by certain parties could mobilize large numbers of votes. The parties that manage to appeal to the Muslim vote in various Muslim countries appear, however, to have little in common, and few of them had an explicitly Islamic political programme. The so-called Muslim vote has often been a protest vote against the establishment, and has not been very successful, with the exception of Algeria’s FIS and Turkey’s Refah Partisi (the latter which was stopped by military intervention).

Even the non-Islamic Muslim parties have had to gain the support of only a fraction of the committed Muslims. Individual Muslims, but also major Islamic movements have for various reasons preferred to support secular parties (personal, class or other group interests may be at stake; the move might wish to alleviate suspicions on the part of the secular (military) establishment or may genuinely believe in a separation of religion from politics; or priority might be given to other ways to gain power or establish a more Islamic society (such as dawa, (general) education, journalism, infiltration of the bureaucracy and the army). Changes in the nature of Muslim electoral politics may be related to the tremendous demographic and socio-economic developments that all Muslim countries have experienced in the course of the past few decades (although their effects have been far from uniform and by no means easily predictable). Mass literacy and mass education have not only made new forms of mass mobilization possible, but have also facilitated the dissemination of new types of Muslim literature. Rural-to-urban migration brought numerous people into closer physical contact with politics, and to some extent increased their dependence on traditional relations of power and patronage. Technologies, computers and satellites have completely changed the nature of the public sphere; such media as radio and television, the audio cassette, fax and e-mail have made unprecedented numbers of people informed participants in it. Access to these media, however, although widespread, is essentially unequal, which may introduce new social cleavages or reinforce old ones. Islamists have often been among the first to understand and utilize the possibilities of these new media and of technology in general, which may have helped them to gain influence at the expense of the ulama. They have also been the most successful in utilizing the media, the struggle for control of the media has been part and parcel of the electoral process.

Participants in the workshop listen attentively to James Piscatori’s opening lecture.

ISIM’S first international conference held in Leiden, 10-12 December 1999, concerned the role of Islam, Islamic political thought, Muslim parties and organizations, and the responses of secular or non-Muslim major countries, Turkey, Indonesia and Nigeria, and that Islam had been a crucial factor in these events – although in a different way in each case.