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INDONESIA'S 2009 ELECTIONS Strategies of Islamic parties

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INDONESIA'S 2009 parliamentary elections are still far off, yet a dampening appears to have befallen the Islamic party scene. It was prompted by reports like that from the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), which said the 'Islamic vote' will suffer compared with previous polls in 1999 and 2004, with the secular Golkar, Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle and Democratic Party gaining the top three positions in the next elections.

To some, this forecast might seem a bit odd. After all, there have been indications of widespread support among the country's Muslims for the implementation of syariah law.

A poll by the Hidayatullah State Islamic University found that more than 70 per cent of Muslims wanted the government to be active in enforcing syariah law. The approval rating for criminal law issues such as hand amputation for theft is about 35 per cent, and that for the stoning of fornicators is an astonishing 52 per cent among women and 45 per cent among men.

These findings notwithstanding, it is highly likely syariah issues will play only a minor role in the 2009 elections.

The fact remains that pro-syariah sentiments have not provided enough ground for most Muslims to vote for Islamic parties. In the 1999 elections, Islamic parties' share of the vote was only 16 per cent, rising to 20.5 per cent in 2004.

Also, for every survey establishing high approval ratings for Islamic issues, there is another asserting the opposite.

In yet another report, the LSI said 57 per cent of those polled would support 'secular values' in politics, while only 33 per cent would back 'Islamic values'.

Also, most Muslims appear to have a broad understanding of the term syariah, associating its implementation with ensuring the observance of religious morals in the community.

Islamic parties appear to share this view, and thus respond accordingly. Indonesia's largest Islamic party, the PPP (Unity and Development Party), rarely speaks of syariah goals, but of 'religious norms' it wants to implement.

Mr Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, the eloquent head of the PPP's parliamentary faction, said his party deliberately endorsed syariah 'not in specific terms', but broadly as 'universal values', thus responding to the diversity among party supporters - ranging from 'leftist Muslims' to 'fundamentalists'. Being vague, the PPP leaves it to every constituent to read into its 'value policy' whatever he or she wants.

It is also crucial to recall that the momentum to write syariah into the Indonesian Constitution has, for now, passed. That moment was the period from 1999 to 2002, when several constitutional amendments were made.

Since then, attention has shifted from the national to the local level, with several provinces applying Islamic rules, labelled by some observers as 'creeping syariahsation'. Most of these involve banning alcohol, ensuring that women wear headscarves and attempting to prevent unmarried couples from mingling.

The PPP, unsurprisingly, supports such steps. Asked how his party planned to reach the 15 per cent target of the total vote in the 2009 elections, PPP secretary-general Irgan Chairul Mahfidz told the party journal *Petiga* that it would do so by 'assessing the market sentiment'.

This nicely captures the party's essence. The PPP's mix of Islamism and pragmatism becomes particularly clear in its aim to win trendier constituencies, even including, as Mr Lukman said, 'girls in short skirts and guys flaunting tattoos'.

Overall, it is a fair bet the PPP will continue to campaign on its safe 'religious values' platform while using Islamist terminology in regions where it knows such talk to be popular.

What about the other Islamic parties? Unlike the PPP, with its diverse mix of followers, the PBB (Crescent Star Party) is a small niche party (2.6 per cent of votes in 2004) that has decided to make the struggle for syariah law its key political platform. But it also shares with the PPP the lack of a blueprint for how syariah law could be implemented comprehensively.

The PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) is the party that made the biggest leap forward in 2004 - 7.3 per cent of votes against 1.4 per cent in 1999. Ideologically, the PKS is the most Islamist of all parties, yet during previous elections, it stressed issues of day-to-day concern to voters such as the rule of law, clean governance and poverty eradication.

It is likely to continue this trend. Clearly aspiring to become a mass-based party, PKS president Tifatul Sembiring has indicated that it plans to reach out to 'secular-nationalist' voters. This would not be possible if it made syariah law its top policy issue in national polls.

Clearly, Islamic politics has an image problem that the Indonesian press often seems only too ready to pick up. It is sometimes alleged that the PPP would only promote Islam when it seems politically useful, and that it shows little concern for pressing social issues.

The famously fragmented state of the Islamic party scene adds to the public belief that Islamic parties are mostly concerned with gaining access to lucrative positions. Also, there is virtually no Islamic party leader with a mass following.

In 1998 and 1999, Dr Amien Rais was the Islamic hope for the presidency, but he decided to run for a pluralist party.

The PPP has a new chairman in Mr Suryadharma Ali, after the departure of the lacklustre Mr Hamzah Haz. But Mr Suryadharma has gained little attention so far, both in his post as a minister in the Yudhoyono Cabinet and as an Islamic leader. What is more, his party seems trapped in internal divisions.

However, while it might not gain the 15 per cent share of the total votes it is targeting, the PPP is also unlikely to suffer as badly as the LSI report says. Still, it might find it increasingly difficult to keep ahead of the PKS.

So, the PPP has not acted on a comprehensive ideological platform; it is an Islamic party, but does not seem to be fully Islamist. Meanwhile, the PKS is Islamist in that it acts on the conviction that society needs to be guided towards a comprehensive Islamic way of life.

Overall, Indonesian Islamic party politics is constitutionalist, pragmatic and ends-oriented.

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