

# Etzioni in Southeast Asia

## The Indonesia Exception

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Amitai Etzioni's recommendation to U.S. policy makers to abandon democracy promotion in volatile Muslim societies and embrace moderate Muslims who may not support democracy but adhere to basic human rights standards may be applicable to certain Middle Eastern states. It parallels U.S. policy in the cold war, in which the criteria for regime support was anticommunism rather than democracy. However, Catharin Dalpino argues that this paradigm may not apply to Southeast Asia and that Etzioni's policy recommendations may indeed backfire in countries such as Indonesia. In that Muslim-majority country, the democratization process has provided leaders with mechanisms to curb the rise of political Islam. Recent studies show that this approach may be working, as Indonesian voters are moving away from religious identification as a determinant in voting behavior.

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In *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*, Amitai Etzioni (2007) proposes a paradigm for U.S. foreign policy that targets the weaknesses of both the Bush doctrine and the interventionist tendencies of the international community since the end of the cold war. His policy prescription is a three-pronged stool. First, security should be moved to the top of the list of U.S. priorities and receive clear precedence in an increasingly crowded marketplace of national and special interests. Specifically, it should supplant democracy promotion as a leading policy goal. Second, the concept of security should be leavened to include freedom from deadly violence, maiming, and torture, areas that human rights groups typically classify as "security of the person." Last, policy makers and the American public should be prepared to embrace "illiberal moderates" abroad, leaders who presumably support the Etzioni definition of security but may not (and almost invariably do not) endorse "liberal" Western notions of democracy and human rights.

Democracy promoters may quarrel with Etzioni's underlying assertion that democratization is or was ever given top priority in the Bush (or any other) administration. Regime change may have been the goal of U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the central motivations in each case were initially presented to the American people as security driven: in Afghanistan, to eliminate a fundamentalist government that supported Al Qaeda; in Iraq, to overturn a dictatorship that was

alleged to be threatening the international community with the development of weapons of mass destruction. Democratization was an afterthought and a justification for continued occupation or involvement, although Etzioni is correct that the Bush administration has publicly portrayed democracy in both countries as an insurance policy against future anti-American regimes in these countries. This sequence evokes, on a grander and more expensive scale, the cold war “demonstration elections” in South Vietnam and some Latin American countries, in which hand-picked leaders often underwent *ex post facto* democratization by standing for elections organized by the United States (see, for example, Brodhead, 1984).

Nor does *Security First* (Etzioni, 2007) delve too deeply into the growing diversity of the democratic experience. Rather, it reinforces a somewhat clichéd view of democracy as being able to root only in Western culture. Although the club of advanced democracies is dominated by the West, significant exceptions—Japan, India, and smaller but long-standing democracies such as Botswana and Costa Rica—belie this assumption. However, instead of pondering the durability of Indian democracy, for example, Etzioni focuses primarily on the phenomenon of Hindu nationalism.

To be sure, some international interventions in the 1990s that Etzioni examines, in failed states such as Haiti and Bosnia, were more strongly democracy driven. However, even these examples had a definite, if more tacit, security component. In urging action in Haiti in the mid-1990s, the United States was keenly aware that instability in that small nation increased the flow of U.S.-bound refugees. And however urgent the need to stem human rights abuses in Bosnia, international negotiators also did not want the further disintegration of the fragile new nation to leave a Muslim rump state that might attract Islamist radicals from other regions to defend it.

Nevertheless, Etzioni’s paradigm may have accurately pinned the deficiencies of current U.S. policy in the Middle East. In it, he attempts to shift the fault lines in U.S. relations with the Muslim world from a “them” and “us” dynamic (e.g., Western vs. Muslim) to one in which Americans find common cause with Muslim moderates. That is a common enough—even clichéd—aspiration in the post-September 11 policy environment, but many U.S. policy makers assume that moderate Muslims are by definition liberal, much as in the cold war when U.S. allies who were anticommunist were often extended the courtesy title of “democrats.” But in Etzioni’s view, abandoning the search for democratic reformers is a necessary trade-off in the development of alliances with moderate Muslims.

This may well be a necessity, however temporary, in the Middle East. The difficulty, however, is in Etzioni’s attempts to extend his paradigm globally. Etzioni’s model is crisis driven, and so would-be failed states and the well-known slate of “rogue” states—North Korea and Iran—are central to his focus. Yet how can a policy paradigm that seeks to respond to new challenges pay so little attention to China? The world’s largest nation and fastest rising power is mentioned for its HIV epidemic and its apparent descent into crime as communism abates but does not figure into broad U.S. strategies for the future.

But the *Security First* (Etzioni, 2007) paradigm is clearly aimed at U.S. relations with the Muslim world, and Etzioni can scarcely be faulted for that in the present security environment. A more serious flaw is his reluctance to grapple with the greatest challenge to his paradigm within that world, that of Islam in Southeast Asia and, more specifically, the phenomenon of Indonesia's political transition. The country that hosts the world's largest Muslim population may, over time, demonstrate that democratization offers some of the best mechanisms for preserving moderate Islam.

In his scant treatment of Islam in Southeast Asia, Etzioni is reinforcing a popular tendency to define the Muslim worldview as extremist driven; in doing so, he risks its becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Southeast Asia is often left out of the common calculus that gives weight to Wahhabism but ignores the more syncretic forms of religion that flourish on Islam's geographic periphery.

Indeed, despite its size, Indonesia scarcely registers in the Etzioni universe, and when it does, it is often raised only to be dismissed. For example, in a reference to polls in a group of Muslim-majority countries, Etzioni notes that 70% of Indonesians support democracy. However, he goes on to assert that "Islamic democracy," which is not defined, differs from liberal democracy and that it is likely to lead to majoritarian tyranny. Moreover, he maintains that when elections are held in Islamic democracies, they tend to maintain rather than counter authoritarianism (pp. 144-145). As yet, neither seems to be the case in Indonesia. Although communal violence flared in the 1998-1999 period of Suharto's departure, it has decreased significantly since then. And there is little evidence that Indonesian elections in the democratic era have given rise to an "Algerian dilemma," in which more open political processes invite Islamist radicals to seize control.

It would be inaccurate to claim that the Islamist cause has not been given a boost with the post-Suharto democracy that has been building steadily in Indonesia since 1998. A more open political and regulatory environment has enabled radicals to return to the country and helped give rise to the Jemmah Islamiyah, Southeast Asia's homegrown terrorist network. This has been complicated by U.S. counterterrorism policy in Southeast Asia after September 11, which has raised hackles among some Indonesians who categorically oppose a closer relationship to the United States and given radical Islam common cause with anti-Americanism. As elsewhere in the world, the Iraq war has only exacerbated these trends.

But the key is in proportion. If democracy in Indonesia has given a freer rein to radical Islamists, it has also strengthened mechanisms to check their rise and, thus far, it seems to have the upper hand. This is also due to social structures that have encouraged religious moderation in Indonesia for more than a century by giving voice to different views and schools of Islam.

This trend is famously enshrined in the two major Muslim social organizations: Muhammadiyah, which is meant to represent the "modernist" Islamic trend in Indonesia, and Nahdlatul Ulama, which is identified with the "traditional" school. During the cold war and the later years of Suharto rule, both organizations were alternately constrained and prodded by the government, as Suharto attempted to play the military

off against the Muslim communities.<sup>1</sup> However, as Suharto's hold began to weaken in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, mainstream Muslim social groups took on the character of a surrogate opposition because formal political parties still labored under restrictions imposed on them by the New Order. The salience of these Muslim social groups was underscored when Nahdlatul Ulama President Wahid Abdurrahman became Indonesia's first elected post-Suharto president in 1999.

Beyond social structures, Indonesia's inclusive approach to Islamist parties in the formal political process has heretofore paid off. By refusing to ban Islamist parties from political competition, the government hopes to undercut any outlaw appeal they may have. This has helped to marginalize more radical parties although it has not removed them from the scene altogether. It has also inspired more mainstream "secular" parties to include Muslim concerns in their policy platforms to co-opt the agendas of more radical parties. In a different dimension, the efficacy of this model has held with the settlement of the conflict in Aceh, which allowed Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, the separatist group, to contest for power in local elections. In previous settlement attempts, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka's political role had been the sticking point, and it arguably foundered because the group had been banned.<sup>2</sup>

This approach seems to be working, but it is not without risks. For example, in the interval between the 1999 and 2004 elections, the Justice and Prosperity Party (which goes by the Indonesian acronym PKS) pulled ahead of other radical Islamist parties to become a serious contender for power, if still a minor one. Although radical Islamist parties as a group have tended in the past to collect no more than 3% of the vote, in the 2004 elections, the PKS won 7.5%, most of it in Jakarta, making it the seventh-largest party in the Indonesian parliament. PKS has been likened to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. However, its appeal is not necessarily in its radical theology but rather in its cadre structure, which makes it more disciplined than other Indonesian political parties (Dhume, 2005). The PKS challenge to the secular parties may not be in countering radical Islam but in proving that they organize themselves more around issues than personalities and deliver services more effectively.

The rise of the PKS notwithstanding, there are broader indications that democracy could prove to be a hedge against radical Islam in Indonesia. Studies of the 1999 and 2004 elections have attempted to find the determinants in voting preferences. It has long been an assumption that Indonesians vote according to their religious preference. However, recent data from studies conducted by William R. Liddle and Saiful Mujani (2007) suggest that is no longer the case. Results from the Liddle and Mujani studies suggest that the operative factor in Indonesian elections is now leadership strength and party identification. In a media climate that is significantly more free, parties are able to define themselves to the public. The studies also suggest that Indonesians are now more likely to vote for candidates they believe will be effective leaders rather than those who are merely coreligionists. Neither of these findings bodes well for the rise of political Islam and the security threats that it implies in Indonesia.

Liddle and Mujani's (2007) policy prescription is support for more democratization in Indonesia, a recommendation that would conflict directly with the Etzioni

paradigm. Indonesian political trends during the past decade would seem to favor the Liddle/Mujani view. However, just as *Security First* is a blanket too short to cover the entire Muslim world, much less the larger globe, it would not be possible or advisable to construct a global model from the dynamic between Islam and politics in Indonesia. Despite its size, there is little evidence at this time that radical Middle Eastern Islamists are inclined to draw lessons from the Indonesian experience. On the contrary, evidence of moderate approaches such as those seen in Southeast Asia seem to inspire hostility rather than imitation among Middle Eastern radicals and cause them to target Southeast Asian Muslims for “purification.”

Instead, the Indonesia exception argues for a more region-based approach to policy toward the Islamic world. The ideological polarity of the cold war encouraged superpower rivals to couch their struggles in global terms, although that approach made policy makers miss important exceptions in local situations (the Vietnam war being a major and tragic example of such miscalculation). In the post–September 11 world, defining differences in the Islamic world rather than conflating them is crucial. Etzioni is right to encourage a more nuanced approach to Muslims in general and discourage an us-versus-them dynamic. However, he needs to take his own advice more to heart and allow that in some regions, democracy and moderate Islam may be natural partners. The policy implications of that realization are less sweeping than the Etzioni paradigm but may ultimately be more reassuring.

## Notes

1. For an in-depth description of this technique, see Bertrand (1996).

2. Since independence, Malaysia has pursued a similar policy of including Islamist parties in political competition, but with arguably greater risks. PAS, the main Islamist party and the largest opposition party, has never gained control on the national level but in the 1999 elections was able to win at the local level in two northern states. It attempted to impose shariah law in these two states but was prevented from doing so by the federal government. Despite the continuing threat it poses, many Malaysians believe that its inclusion has encouraged PAS to keep violent terrorist groups at arm’s length.

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