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Post-Mubarak Egypt: Is Indonesia the Model?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

As post-revolution Egypt ponders its new state superstructure, various models have been assessed by Egypt watchers. Indonesia is increasingly being seen as a possible model.

Commentary

NOW THAT the Mubarak regime has been deposed, many views have been offered on the likely polity of the new Egypt. Several models have been cited. Two stand out: Iran and Turkey. Increasingly, the Indonesian model is also being heard. All three are Muslim majority states. Some watchers, like former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, believe Indonesia is the most appropriate model for Egypt to follow. President Obama, who grew up as a child in Indonesia, has made comparisons between Egypt and Indonesia in the aftermath of the uprising.

There have been reports about the United States possibly making a pitch to the caretaker military regime in Egypt to consider the Indonesian model. The White House apparently is studying various precedents, including Indonesia, to assist Egypt in its political transition. Former Indonesian foreign minister and ambassador to Cairo Hasan Wirayuda recently delivered a message from President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono sharing the president's thoughts on the Indonesian experience. There are obvious similarities between Egypt and Indonesia. But how apt a model is Indonesia for Egypt?

Egypt 2011 and Indonesia 1998

The most striking resemblance between Egypt 2011 and Indonesia 1998 was, of course, regime change and the pivotal role of "people power". Mubarak and Suharto were both generals – from the air force and army respectively – who became political leaders. Like Suharto, Mubarak was thrown out after three decades of authoritarian rule. Both amassed power partly on the back of fears of external and internal threats. And both were brought down eventually by a confluence of latent incendiary factors triggered off by economic hardships – rising food prices in the case Egypt, and rising fuel prices amid the Asian financial crisis in the case of Indonesia in 1998.

Significantly, both fell when the military refused to lend support. In the case of Egypt, it led to the military taking over interim power – at least until an elected government comes in - making the change something like a silent coup. In the case of Indonesia, the military reformed itself and withdrew from politics.

For regime preservation, both Mubarak and Suharto played up the threat of Islamist extremism – partly to buttress their own position and win foreign support. Mubarak was deposed without him reaching reconciliation with his nemesis, the Muslim Brotherhood. Suharto, towards the end of his rule, reconciled with his Islamic constituency. The irony for Mubarak was that he was thrown out not by the Muslim Brotherhood but by the wider population through people power. The irony for Suharto: the Islamic constituency could not, and would not save him when his fall became inevitable – also under the pressure of people power.

In both Egypt 2011 and Indonesia 1998, the fury of a long-suppressed people was devastating. The impact was irreversible, though Egypt 2011 was less messy and less bloody than Indonesia 1998.

The Indonesian Model

To be sure, talk about the appropriate model for Egypt is presumptuous. After all, even the Egyptians are grappling with it. The last thing the world should do is to impose a model on them. The Egyptians have the right to decide their own future. Whatever it is, the final shape of the new Egyptian polity should be the product of a national consensus of all the political forces in the country, with no groups left out. This process of forging a national consensus is what the Indonesians do very well; they call it *musyawarah dan mufakat*. Being inclusive, it also ensures system stability. There are signs that the caretaker regime in Egypt is doing this as the political system is being redesigned.

But assuming Egypt post-Mubarak decides to follow the Indonesian model, what do we mean by this?

To begin with, it will not be like Iran. The new Egypt will not be a theocracy because Indonesia is not a theocracy. It will also not be like Turkey where a secular government is run by an Islamist party, the AKP. The Islamist bloc in Indonesia is currently not enjoying wide national support. But this can change over time should the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) become more adept as a political player in the democratic system and grow in stature. The highly popular Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will be even more adept than the PKS and the Islamic bloc in Jakarta combined. The Indonesian model, if adopted by Egypt, could see the disparate political forces, including the Brotherhood, forging compromises through coalitions.

Egypt will also not be a military-dominated state which Indonesia no longer is, in the post-Suharto Reformasi era. The Egyptian Army will disengage from politics like its Indonesian counterpart. But the Indonesian model also means the military still prevails behind the scenes – just like in Turkey. While the military defers to civilian rule, it does not prevent generals from rising to the presidency through democratic channels. The current president, Yudhoyono, is a former general who shed his uniform to successfully contest the elections.

If the Indonesian model is emulated, then the Egyptian polity would be a multi-party parliamentary system with a civilian presidential leadership. Indonesia is a non-theocratic state that accommodates in a fine balance the three major forces of secularism, Islam and the military. These are also the key forces that will determine the future of the new Egypt.

Too Much, Too Soon?

The Indonesian polity post-Suharto is stabilising and its economy growing -- but only after a decade. A key lesson from Indonesia is that restructuring the political system cannot be rushed. The post-revolutionary euphoria in Indonesia led to what I call “democratic diarrhoea” – too much loosening of the system too fast. It did not take Indonesians too long to realise that an uncontrolled proliferation of political parties in the name of democracy is not necessarily a good thing. Now they are trying to downsize the party system to a more manageable size. Devolving power to the regions too fast through decentralisation can also lead to complications. Now they are trying to refine this.

After 12 years, post-Suharto Indonesia is still work-in-progress. Reordering Indonesia is an unfinished business. But Indonesia’s experience shows that a Muslim-majority state can also be democratic, inclusive and economically viable. Post-Mubarak Egypt can learn from Indonesia, but it will have to be an Egyptian solution – determined by Egyptians themselves, through democratic choice.

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