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Indonesia's Democratic Miracle

by Kishore Mahbubani

JAKARTA – Modern miracles do happen. Ten years ago, as the Asian financial crisis savaged Indonesia's economy, many experts predicted that the country would become unstable, if not splinter. Instead, Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic country, has emerged as a beacon of freedom and democracy for the Muslim world. What happened? And why hasn't the world taken note?

The story is as complex as Indonesia itself. One leading expert on Indonesia, Benedict Anderson, roots Indonesia's nature in its core Javanese culture, particularly the wayang religious tradition. According to Anderson, "In contrast to the great religions of the Near East...the religion of wayang has no prophet, no message, no Bible, no Redeemer...The endless variety and sharp individuality of its dramatis personae indicate that wayang reflects the variegation of human life as it is felt by the Javanese..." In short, Javanese culture helps Indonesia handle the many diverse voices that a new democracy throws up.

There is also a strong Indonesian tradition of resolving disagreements through "musyawarah dan mufakat" (consultation and consensus). Of course, this tradition has not always prevented violence, most notoriously in the killings that followed the 1966 coup against President Sukarno. And ten years ago, during the financial crisis, violent anti-Chinese riots erupted again, causing many Chinese to flee the country.

Today, however, many of those Chinese have returned. In a remarkable development, Chinese language and culture, which had been suppressed for decades, is allowed free expression. By contrast, imagine Turkey, a more advanced member state of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, allowing free expression of Kurdish language and culture.

Indonesia's record looks even more remarkable when compared to the United States. Americans explain their country's democratic backsliding by pointing to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But Indonesia was attacked, too, with the bombing in Bali coming little more than a year later, on October 12, 2002. Despite this, Indonesia has consolidated its democracy. Indeed, in 2005 Freedom House declared that Indonesia had moved from "partly free" to "free."

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono deserves great credit for this remarkable success. Under his leadership, the long-standing and painful Aceh conflict was peacefully resolved. Some credit the 2004 tsunami, which killed hundreds of thousands of Acehnese, for this breakthrough. But Sri Lanka was hit equally hard by the tsunami, and since then the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict has worsened.

Today, the biggest threat to Indonesia's democracy comes from America, even though most Americans

want Indonesia's democracy to succeed. With modern technology, Indonesian Muslims can see clearly the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza, the disastrous results of the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and America's silence when Lebanon was bombed in July 2006. Many senior Americans were puzzled that Turkey, a long-standing NATO ally and a secular state, refused to allow American forces to use Turkey as a base to invade Iraq. If relatively secular Turkish society could be swept by a surge of anti-American sentiment, so, too, can Indonesia society.

Indeed, a major struggle is underway between those who want Indonesia to become more fundamentalist and those who want to preserve the traditionally open and tolerant nature of Javanese culture. Curiously, while many Americans and Europeans want moderate Muslim voices to succeed in Indonesia (and Southeast Asia), they often undermine moderates with policies that are perceived as anti-Islamic.

America's stance on military aid to Indonesia is but one example. For several years, some members of the US Senate have maintained a punitive policy towards Indonesia by cutting off military assistance and curtailing Indonesian military training in the US. These punitive policies are self-defeating. In recent years, the Indonesian military has provided a model for other Third World military forces on how to accept a transition to a full democracy. There are no threats of a coup d'état, and senior generals, such as Bambang, who studied in American military colleges, returned to Indonesia as convinced democrats.

It is a tragedy that ignorance of how much Indonesia has changed is being allowed to endanger its democratic development – and its role as a beacon of freedom and hope in the Islamic world. It is to be hoped that Barack Obama, should he win America's presidency, will recall the tolerant Indonesia where he grew up and shape policies toward it accordingly.

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