

Straits Times (13 August 2008) - Indonesia's political miracle

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THINK-TANK

Indonesia's political miracle

By Kishore Mahbubani

A POLITICAL miracle has evolved on Singapore's doorstep. Yet most Singaporeans are probably unaware of this political miracle: Indonesia has moved forward in democratisation at a time when America has been slipping backwards.

This is how I described this political miracle when President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia invited me to deliver the Third Presidential Lecture (after Bill Gates and Shaukat Aziz) on July 31:

'The world's beacon of freedom and democracy is the United States of America. But in the last seven years, America has been walking backwards. If someone had told me 10 years ago that the first modern developed society to reintroduce torture would be America, I would have said 'impossible'.

'But the impossible has happened. Ms Irene Khan, the head of Amnesty International, has described Guantanamo as 'a Gulag of our times'. She is right. In addition, America has also been quietly retreating in the area of civil liberties.

'Many of my American friends explain this by saying that America was attacked on 9/11. But if the beacon of freedom and democracy could retreat in human rights after one attack, it shows how fragile America's commitment is to some key human rights principles.

'By contrast, the second country to be attacked after 9/11 was Indonesia, on Oct 12, 2002 in Bali. Despite this, Indonesia did not retreat. Indeed, though Indonesia experienced a wrenching financial and economic crisis in 1998 and 1999, and though it experienced social and political turmoil as a result of this financial crisis, it went steadily ahead in its advance towards democracy.

'Remarkably, Freedom House declared in 2005 that Indonesia's status has moved from 'partly free' to 'free' during President Yudhoyono's term of office. He deserves a lot of credit for this remarkable success.

'This is why two eminent scholars, Andrew MacIntyre and Douglas Ramage, have said that Dr Yudhoyono 'is the most capable, focused and internationalist of the post-Suharto presidents' and that 'his record of

leadership is unlikely to be beaten over the next decade or so.'

After delivering these remarks, I told the Indonesian audience that this was not the first time that I had made this claim. I did so first in San Francisco in February this year on a panel with other international experts on democracy. They agreed with my observation.

To understand how remarkable Indonesia's political transformation has been, just compare its political stability today with the political instability of Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Indonesia's population is much larger and more diverse than those of these three other Asean countries. At the height of the Asian financial crisis, if anyone had predicted that 10 years later Indonesia would emerge with the most stable democracy among the victims of the crisis, he or she would have been deemed a fool. Indeed, I recall vividly many foreign experts predicting then that Indonesia was likely to break up. The smart money was betting then on worst case scenarios for Indonesia.

Instead, the best case scenario has unfolded in Indonesia. Why has this happened? What strengths does the Indonesian body politic have?

One key strength it has is a strong culture of openness and tolerance. Ideologies are given short shift. Hence, the 'radical Islamist' parties get few votes, often less than 10 per cent.

A renowned Indonesian scholar, Dr Benedict Anderson, has described well how traditional Javanese culture accepts diversity. An understanding of Javanese mythology is essential for understanding why Indonesia is doing well in its democratic transition.

As Dr Anderson writes: 'In Java...there is still an almost universally accepted religious mythology which commands deep emotional and intellectual adherence. This is what I shall call, for convenience, the wayang tradition... Wayang, like any other metaphysical and ethical 'system', is concerned to explain the universe...In contrast to the great religions of the Near East, however, 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...'

This Javanese weltanschauung can accommodate the many new voices thrown up in a new democracy. Indeed, the Indonesian Parliament is bursting with many new voices. This has delayed decision-making in many instances, like ratification of the Asean Charter.

Democracies move slowly in changing course. But if Indonesia's democracy succeeds in keeping the country unified and politically stable, it would have made an enormous contribution to both Indonesia and South-east Asia. A successful and tolerant Indonesian democracy also sends a powerful

message of hope to the Islamic world. So far, with the possible exceptions of Turkey and Malaysia (which are experiencing their own political traumas), no member state of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has successfully modernised and democratised. Indonesia's success could inspire other OIC countries.

I was also inspired by the courage and dynamism of some of the young Indonesians I met. Some have launched a new movement called 'Modernisator'. Its manifesto can be found on www.modernisator.org. I urge young Singaporeans to read this manifesto. It has a bold message which embraces modernity and diversity. Its cosmopolitan message contrasts sharply with the messages of radical religious groups. If the Modernisator movement catches fire, it will further strengthen the open and tolerant nature of Indonesian society.

It is a pity that the world has not paid greater attention to this Indonesian miracle. Since Singapore is unofficially recognised as the think-tank of South-east Asia, we should make a greater effort to study this political miracle and educate the world about it.

The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS. This weekly column is rotated among eight leading figures from Singapore's research and tertiary institutions.

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