Indonesia: Asia’s Emerging Democratic Power?

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Jakarta: On 20th October, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono will be inaugurated for a 2nd term as the President of Indonesia. He presides over a country which has defied all the grim predictions after the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998. By all accounts, the turnaround of Southeast Asia’s largest nation, the fourth most populous in the world, and the largest Muslim majority country, is nothing sort of spectacular.

Recalling the dark days after Suharto’s downfall, Fauzi Ichsan, an Indonesian economist, remembers, “the betting was not whether Indonesia would fall apart -- breaking into half a dozen island states -- but how soon”.

But a decade after Suharto’s ouster, a new Indonesia is emerging, which is poised to play a more important role in the affairs of the Asia Pacific region, and indeed the world.

The new Indonesia is the direct result of its consolidating democracy. This has been a painful process. Widespread riots accompanied the weeks before and after Suharto’s downfall. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives. But the past two general elections (both parliamentary and presidential), including the August 2009 Presidential elections which returned incumbent Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), have been free of violence. The terrorist strikes on the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton Hotels in Jakarta that followed the last presidential election had nothing to do with electoral animosity.

Moreover, the elections show declining support for Islamic parties, whom, many in the West had mistakenly feared, could take the nation down on a spiral of extremism and violence. Their share of votes declined from 38.1% in the 2004 elections to 27.8 % in the 2009 elections, the poorest showing ever by Islamic parties in a democratic election in Indonesia.

Some argue that elections in newly democratic countries with weak political and administrative institutions generate an intense nationalism leading to violence and war. But the Indonesian elections have shown otherwise. Julia Suryakusuma, an Indonesian writer, says that the victory of SBY was “an unequivocal rejection of the juvenile xenophobic nationalism” that some political parties, including the one led by former President Megawati Soekarnoputri, had espoused. It was also a rejection of military revivalism represented by former Army chief Wiranto, who contested for the vice presidency under Jusuf Kalla.

Instead of turning inward, Indonesia shows a new commitment to international cooperation. Rizal Sukma, a prominent Indonesian analyst, says that, “Indonesia, once seen as the instability-producer in Southeast Asia” could “become the security provider to the region and beyond.” Reflective of Indonesia’s new approach is its effort to reform the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which would have human
rights and democracy as its basic values, and develop new mechanisms and institutions to address transnational problems such as terrorism, pandemics, and environmental pollution. In the words of a Jakarta Post editorial, “As the largest ASEAN member – in terms of population, geography and economy – Indonesia has the obligation to encourage the universal values of democracy and human rights to our less democratic neighbours.”

Some of these proposals met with opposition from the more conservative ASEAN members. Jakarta’s idea of a regional peacekeeping force was dropped. Another idea, a regional human rights body, was watered down. Undeterred, Indonesia took its message to the global arena. It has developed solid ties with other democracies, especially Australia, US, Japan and India. Relations with Australia, often hostile during the Suharto era, have never been better. Ties with the US have been normalized, with the lifting of sanctions imposed after the East Timor violence in 1999 blamed on Indonesian security forces.

Indonesia’s shift reflects its new political elite’s “democratic pride”. They, as diplomat Umar Hadi told me, see their nation as a standard bearer in Asia of “modernity, moderate Islam and democratic values”. Indonesia is putting Japan and India, the two established democracies of Asia, to shame by making democracy promotion a key objective of its foreign policy. While Tokyo and New Delhi compete with China to woo the brutal regime in Burma, and other members of ASEAN shy away from isolating the junta, Jakarta’s position is moving closer to that of the US. “We now find ourselves often making the same statements [towards Burma’s regime] as Western countries and international organizations did toward Indonesia during the Soeharto years,” says the Jakarta Post.

But Jakarta’s democracy promotion approach is drastically different from that of the US under the Bush administration. Instead of building an alliance of democracies, or promoting democracy through coercive means, as Bush did, Jakarta’s newly democratic government is pursuing an inclusive approach to democracy promotion and cooperative peace.

Thus, in December 2008, Indonesia launched the Bali Democracy Forum. Membership in the Forum is not restricted to democratic countries alone. Indonesia has made it clear that it will not pursue an aggressive posture of democracy promotion and will not close the door to countries which are not democratic or fully democratic, such as Burma, Brunei, Singapore, and even China. All of them were represented at the inaugural forum. The Forum is to share ideas about democracy and develop mechanisms for mutual assistance in building democratic institutions.

The new Indonesia arouses mixed feelings among its neighbours. With a touch of envy, a commentary in the Manila-based Philippine Daily Inquirer called Indonesia “the new democratic heavyweight of Southeast Asia” and “democracy’s gatekeeper in the region,” a role that should have belonged to the Philippines had it kept its own house in
order. Along with its robust economic performance, Indonesia’s democratic consolidation challenges the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes in Asia. At the first Bali forum, Singapore stressed the need for “good governance” (which comes with its authoritarian regime), rather than democracy. Neighbors are apprehensive that Jakarta may be seeking a larger international role at the expense of ASEAN. For example, Indonesia has been an active member of the G-20 group, which is competing with the G-8 as a manager of global issues in the 21st century. Indonesia also seeks membership in a new Australian-proposed regional grouping (an Asia-Pacific Community) comprising the bigger players like China, US, Australia, Japan, and India. While such a club may not be feasible anytime soon, there is little question that Indonesia has defied dire predictions about its future after Suharto’s ouster to enter into a new era of democratic governance and regional leadership. And in that process, it has silenced critics of democratization who blame it for internal violence and foreign adventurism.

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