



## Is Indonesia a Model for the Arab Spring? Islam, Democracy, and Diplomacy

James B. Hoesterey  
Emory University

**A**s protestors filled Tahrir Square in Cairo in January 2011, Western diplomats, academics, and political pundits were searching for the best political analogy for the promise—and problems—of the Arab Uprising. Whereas neoconservative skeptics fretted that Egypt and Tunisia might go the way of post-revolutionary Iran, Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright praised Indonesia's democratization as the ideal model for the Arab Spring. During her 2009 visit to Indonesia, Clinton proclaimed: "If you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity, and women's rights can coexist, go to Indonesia." Certainly Indonesia of May 1998 is not Egypt of January 2011, yet some comparisons are instructive. Still reeling from the Asian financial crisis of 1997, middle class Indonesians were fed up with corruption, cronyism, and a military that operated with impunity. On 21 May 1998 Soeharto resigned after three decades of authoritarian rule. Despite fits of starts and stops, the democratic transition has brought political and economic stability. Whereas academics and pundits have debated the merits of the Indonesia model for democratic transition,<sup>1</sup> in this article I consider how the notion of Indonesia as a model for the Arab Spring has reconfigured transnational Muslim networks and recalibrated claims to authority and authenticity within the global *umma*.

An increasing body of scholarship devoted to global Muslim networks offers important insights into the *longue durée* of merchant traders and itinerant preachers connecting the Middle East with Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> In his critique of Benedict Anderson's famous explanation of "imagined communities" as the result of print capitalism *within* national borders, historian Michael Laffan argued that Indonesian nationalism had important roots in global Muslim networks connecting the Dutch East Indies with Cairo's famous al-Azhar University.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I examine how transnational networks of Muslim

diplomats and civil society leaders influence the intertwined political projects of democratization and Islamization. I describe how Indonesian diplomats have responded to the Arab Spring as a way to increase their profile on the geopolitical stage as a champion of democracy and exemplar of authentic Islam.

### **Exegetical Authority, Everyday Authenticity**

In the aftermath of colonial rule, Indonesian President Sukarno garnered respect throughout the Muslim world through the Non-Alignment Movement and the Asia-Africa conference held in Bandung in 1955.<sup>4</sup> Yet Sukarno's acclaim was based on the political authority of his anti-imperialism, not the Arab world's interest in the Muslim cultures of Southeast Asia. In contemporary configurations of religious authority, Indonesians typically study the exegetical commentaries of Middle Eastern scholars, not the other way around. Indonesians today can easily purchase translated books by Yusuf al-Qaradawi and televangelist Amr Khaled, yet very few, if any, Egyptians have ever read books by Indonesian scholar Nurcholish Madjid or televangelist Abdullah Gymnastiar. As Martin van Bruinessen has observed, "Indonesian Muslims have developed a wide range of unique expressions of Islam, but they have shown no great zeal in propagating them to other parts of the Muslim world" (2012: 122). Indonesian Muslims, the vast majority of whom do not speak Arabic, often feel a sense of inferiority regarding the presumed formal religious authority of Muslim scholars in the Middle East.

Whereas Indonesians might defer authority to Arab Muslims in matters of *fiqh*, they point to Indonesian cultural values that provide authenticity in terms of everyday comportment, or *adab*. Many believe that Indonesians practice a more moderate and tolerant form of Islam. These sentiments are especially evident in recent portrayals of Egyptians in Indonesian cinema. After decades during which Western films dominated Indonesian cinemas, the burgeoning genre of Islamic cinema often includes stories about Muslim networks that connect Indonesians with the Middle East. The moral protagonist of the 2008 blockbuster film *Verses of Love*, Fahri, is an Indonesian student earning his degree in *fiqh* at al-Azhar University. Fahri's everyday piety stands in stark contrast to depictions of the hypocrisy, misogyny, and violence of Egyptian men. In one scene, an Egyptian beats and curses his female relative in the streets of Cairo. In another, a man clad in a white robe becomes enraged when a Muslim gives up her seat on the train for the sick mother of a tattooed and scantily-clad American. "We don't give up our seats for infidel terrorists," he yells at the Muslim woman. "Don't you know what America has done in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq?" When the man tries to punch the Muslim woman, Fahri steps in and urges him to *salawat an-nabi* (offer praise and blessings to the Prophet Muhammad). In fluent Arabic Fahri reminds him

that the Prophet Muhammad demanded respect and safe passage for foreign guests: “and to violate this command is to insult the Prophet himself. And to insult the Prophet is the same as insulting Allah.” The Egyptian man punches Fahri and leaves in disgust. Throughout this film (and others), the portrayal of Egyptian antagonists and Indonesian protagonists privileges the everyday authenticity of Islam as practiced by Indonesians over the exegetical authority of Egyptian clerics.

In 2008, pop culture and politics came together when Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono invited foreign ambassadors to a special screening of *Verses of Love* at the Century XXI Theater in Jakarta. The president’s spokesperson, Dr. Dino Djalal, introduced the film as an antidote to the inflammatory, anti-Islamic film “*Fitnah*.” As I have argued elsewhere, this film is about much more than the relationship between Islam and the West. The aforementioned train scene suggests a renewed confidence with respect to Indonesia’s place and potential *within* the global *umma*. In this respect, the special screening of *Verses of Love* was as much about Indonesian pride as Muslim solidarity. In his speech to the foreign ambassadors, President Yudhoyono invited Western and Muslim countries alike to view Indonesia as a place where devotion to Islam and dedication to democracy co-exist. Likewise, when Mubarak stepped down years later, Indonesian diplomats were eager to share Indonesia’s story with their Egyptian friends.

### **Diplomatic Indonesia: Rebranding Islam and Democracy on the Global Stage**

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Indonesia’s Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD) convened Egyptian and Indonesian academics, government officials, and civil society leaders from May 25-27, 2011 for the “Egypt-Indonesia Dialogue on Democratic Transition.”<sup>6</sup> Over the next eighteen months, IPD sponsored four additional workshops: “Building Electoral Democracy in Egypt: Lessons Learned from the Indonesian Experience” (July 25, 2011 in Cairo);<sup>7</sup> “Empowering the Electoral Management Body” (October 20-22, 2011 in Indonesia); “Islam, the State, and Politics” (April 11-12, 2012 in Jakarta);<sup>8</sup> and, “Constitutional Reform and Constitution Building” (November 5-7, 2012 in Bali).

Dr. Hassan Wirajuda convened the inaugural Egypt-Indonesia Dialogue. One of IPD’s founders and patrons, Wirajuda was the architect of Indonesia’s soft-power diplomatic strategy—what he coined as “total diplomacy.” With degrees from University of Virginia, Harvard University, and Tufts’ Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, as well as diplomatic posts as ambassador to Egypt (1997-1998) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (2001-2009), Wirajuda adeptly understood Indonesia’s strategic position as potential friend of both Islam

At the subsequent gathering on July 25, 2011 in Cairo, one Egyptian woman reported a disturbing change in Egypt's political climate after their first meeting. Noting the violence that erupted just days prior, she lamented that the transition period seemed almost "too tough."<sup>10</sup> Indonesian delegates consoled that reform is a process, acknowledging that Indonesia is now going through its second wave of reform. Wirajuda's personal reflections offer insights into how Indonesia imagines itself vis-à-vis the Arab Spring:

The young Egyptian revolutionaries think in terms of total overhaul of social and political life in their country. They have had only three or four months to think the situation through, while we have had more than ten years to reflect. They are still very emotional in Egypt, but in the end they can also learn (155).

Despite the rhetoric that "sharing is caring," Wirajuda's comments also reflect Indonesian diplomats' renewed confidence in what the Indonesian model can offer. The statement about Egyptians as emotional is also a normative judgment about Indonesians as the purported exemplars of ethical and rational comportment. In this respect, discourses of diplomacy parallel the implicit moral narrative of the film *Verses of Love*. In both pop culture and diplomacy, Indonesians reckon authority and authenticity not only in terms of the letter of the law but also in everyday ethics, *adab*.

Indonesia is eager to capitalize on its reputation as the model of Islam, democracy, and religious pluralism. Indonesian delegates noted that, decades prior to Iran's Islamic Revolution, their country decided to take a middle path that was neither secular democracy nor Islamic theocracy. Wirajuda described the role of Islam in democratic Indonesia: "Today, if any groups take an interest in championing the adoption of Shariah, they are free to do so. If the majority rejects their proposal, they must bow to the will of the majority. These are the kinds of Indonesian experiences that we feel essential to share with Egypt" (158). Indonesian intellectual Nurcholish Madjid once coined the slogan, "Islam Yes, Islamic political parties No." In post-authoritarian Indonesia Islamist parties such as the Prosperity and Justice Party (PKS) play an important role in public discourse, but have fared poorly in electoral politics.

Dr. Dino Djalal is another proponent of Indonesia's balance of Islam and democracy. Currently Indonesia's ambassador to the United States, Djalal helped organize the aforementioned screening of the film *Verses of Love* while previously serving as President Yudhoyono's spokesperson. In 2012 Ambassador Djalal received Indonesia's "Marketer of the Year" award for his adept ability to promote Indonesia on the international stage. Consider this excerpt from his acceptance speech:

If any of my efforts have been successful, it is because Indonesia is now in demand and selling well in the world. When I was head of the political division in the Indonesian embassy twelve years ago, it was very difficult to market Indonesia because we were considered a country with many problems, almost a failed state. But now, on account of Indonesia's assets, it's easy to promote Indonesia as an excellent and dazzling product. Now is the time for Indonesia to go global.<sup>11</sup>

On April 16, 2013 Ambassador Djalal convened a panel discussion on Capitol Hill with ambassadors from Egypt and Libya and the Charges d'Affaires from Tunisia, "Transitions to Democracy: Experiences of Egypt, Indonesia Libya, and Tunisia."<sup>12</sup> During his opening remarks, Djalal expressed Indonesia's solidarity with Arab Spring countries, "One common thing among us...I think all of us were told at one point in our life that our countries, our nations were not ready yet for democracy. And we are set to prove that wrong." To express international solidarity and also promote one's own national profile is a delicate balancing act. Similar to Wirajuda, Ambassador Djalal was careful to frame his comments in terms of sharing lessons:

This is the first lesson for Arab Spring countries: things WILL get worse before they get better. But Indonesia's experiences demonstrated that we could stabilize in about three or four years.... As a result Indonesia is now the third largest democracy in the world and arguably the strongest democracy in Southeast Asia. What are the lessons learned? Not just lessons, mistakes also. I wish our friends from Arab Spring countries can learn from these mistakes and lessons.

Ambassador Djalal proceeded to tell stories about Indonesia's difficulties with its first election, the decision to embrace power-holders of the past, and their efforts to build a strong political system that depends on institutions and the rule of law, not strong personalities. He urged his Arab Spring colleagues to not compromise democracy, but also expressed caution about the potential consequences of democracy: "Accept the possibility whereby state authoritarianism might be replaced by mass authoritarianism." With respect to protecting minority religious groups, these words ring true not just for post-Mubarak Egypt but also post-Soeharto Indonesia.

Despite its laudable successes, Indonesia has experienced increasing intolerance and violence towards minority religious groups (Muslim and otherwise). Unfortunately this is not simply a matter of hardliner mass organizations, but actually implicates the state. Whereas Soeharto once co-opted state-sponsored organizations such as the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), mass organizations such as MUI and the Islamic Defenders Front

(FPI) now leverage the symbolism of Islam in order to jockey for the political power of the state. Islamist political parties such as PKS have not fared well at the ballot box, but President Yudhoyono has given strategic ministerial posts to Islamists who have subsequently used their legitimacy to promote controversial anti-pornography and anti-blasphemy laws. Hardliner groups have attacked Ahmadiyyah and Shi'a mosques with relative impunity by the state and tacit complicity by the police.

Some human rights observers now wonder whether Indonesia is indeed a model to which Arab Spring countries should aspire.<sup>13</sup> Many Indonesians blame Yudhoyono for his hesitation to enforce the rule of law. Recently, victims of religious intolerance marched on the U.S. embassy in Jakarta to demand that the New York-based Appeal to Conscience Foundation revoke its decision to give Yudhoyono the "World Statesman Award" for his commitment to democracy, tolerance, and pluralism. In response, Yudhoyono summoned advisors for an emergency meeting to discuss religious tolerance. As Robert Hefner (2000) has argued, Islam and democracy are certainly compatible, but it requires a civil state. Indonesia may not be the ideal exemplar, but it does offer an instructive model—for better and worse. Similar to the nuances in Islamic ethics between *fiqh* and *adab*, every democracy must differentiate democratic theory from its practice in everyday life. ✧

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Whereas Carothers and Indrāvati find the analogy compelling, Knuckler and Pepinsky are skeptical about the limits of comparison. Sidel finds the parallels useful, but is critical of Indonesia's mistakes.

<sup>2</sup>Azra 2004; Laffan 2003; Tagliocozzo 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Laffan 2003.

<sup>4</sup>Perwita 2007.

<sup>5</sup>Hoesterey and Clark 2012.

<sup>6</sup>Program and participants for May 25-27, 2011 workshop in Jakarta: [http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2010\\_11/2011\\_05\\_25-27\\_IND\\_RES-WSC\\_IND-EGYPT\\_Dial\\_JKT.html](http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2010_11/2011_05_25-27_IND_RES-WSC_IND-EGYPT_Dial_JKT.html).

<sup>7</sup>Program and participants for July 25, 2011 workshop in Cairo: [http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2011-12/2012\\_04\\_11-12\\_IND\\_RES-WSC\\_IND-EGYPT-TUN\\_Dial\\_JAK.html](http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2011-12/2012_04_11-12_IND_RES-WSC_IND-EGYPT-TUN_Dial_JAK.html).

<sup>8</sup>Program and participants for April 11-12, 2012 workshop in Indonesia: [http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2011-12/2012\\_04\\_11-12\\_IND\\_RES-WSC\\_IND-EGYPT-TUN\\_Dial\\_JAK.html](http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2011-12/2012_04_11-12_IND_RES-WSC_IND-EGYPT-TUN_Dial_JAK.html).

<sup>9</sup><http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/06/08/indonesian-foreign-minister-wirajuda-on-u.s.-indonesian-comprehensive-partnership/mds>.

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2011-12/2012\\_04\\_11-12\\_IND\\_RES-WSC\\_IND-EGYPT-TUN\\_Dial\\_JAK.html](http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.IND/2011-12/2012_04_11-12_IND_RES-WSC_IND-EGYPT-TUN_Dial_JAK.html).

<sup>11</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ho1bPb3atIo> (my translation).

<sup>12</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=W-H22LXA1ag>.

<sup>13</sup>Harsono 2012.