

Anthony Bubalo and Greg Fealy
Why West should come to Islamist party
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Paul Wolfowitz, a former US ambassador to Jakarta and presumptive head of the World Bank, once regretted that Indonesian Islam could not be exported to the rest of the Muslim world. Its virtues, he said, were moderation, tolerance and a democratic spirit, all of which were in short supply elsewhere in Muslim Asia and the Middle East.

Wolfowitz's view is a common one among Western observers. Indeed, insofar as Indonesian Islam is seen to have radical tendencies, these are attributed to Middle Eastern influences. But the interactions between Muslims in the Middle East and Southeast Asia are more complex than is often assumed. The Indonesia-based terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah, for example, owes as much to local traditions of armed militancy as it does to the violent jihadism of al-Qa'ida.

It would also be wrong to assume that all influences on Southeast Asian Islam from the Middle East are negative. In Indonesia, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) shows how Middle Eastern ideas and organisational methods can have a positive influence on democratisation and on improving ethical standards in public life.

PKS is unique in Indonesian politics. It draws its inspiration and ideology from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. It places high value on morality, professionalism and community service. It is the only genuine cadre party in Indonesia and is the least corrupt of all the main political organisations. Members usually rise through the ranks on the basis of merit rather than money or patronage, as is the case with other parties.

The party is not without blemish. There is an undercurrent of anti-Semitism in the party — a less savoury import from the Middle East. Some members also have questionable backgrounds, including connections to violent groups and conspiracy. Still, PKS has been notable for its commitment to cleaning up politics. The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood has helped, in this case, to provide a new paradigm of Islamic political behaviour that has strengthened democracy in Indonesia.

Ironically, precisely because of the Brotherhood connection, PKS has been labelled a fundamentalist party and excluded by many Western governments from "Muslim dialogue" programs. This is short-sighted. If Australia is serious about engagement with the Muslim world, it should give greater priority to parties such as PKS.

The role PKS is playing in Indonesia's democratic consolidation is also instructive in terms of the debate about democratisation in the Middle East. The fear is often expressed that elections in the Middle East would bring to power Islamists whose commitment to democracy would not outlive their own electoral victory.

But while PKS is not in power, it has remained steadfastly committed to constitutionality. Together with the Islamist Justice and Development Party, which rules Turkey, it illustrates that Islamist victories don't necessarily mean "one man, one vote, one time". Indeed, for other Islamist movements that have watched violent efforts to seize power fail in countries such as Egypt and Algeria, these examples underline that there is more to be gained from ballots than bullets.

Another concern often expressed in the West is that even if Islamists are prepared to play by the rules of the democratic game, the rise of Islamism will be inimical to Western interests and the rights of women and non-Muslim minorities in Middle Eastern societies. These concerns are real, but they also miss the point.

The rights of women and minorities are no more protected by secular autocrats. Nor have friendly dictators shielded the West from terrorism. So why use Islamism as an excuse to delay the long, invariably messy and risky task of building democratic institutions? Such institutions better protect everyone's rights and provide avenues within these societies for non-violent political expression rather than spinning off new terrorists. If, therefore, Islamists want to play a part in democratisation, even if only for tactical reasons, this should be encouraged.

Moreover, as PKS and its Turkish counterpart demonstrate, many Islamists — in contrast to flat-earth al-Qa'ida types — are also politicians.

In Turkey and Indonesia, parliamentary Islamists talk about the economy more than they talk about sharia precisely because they have to address the real concerns of the people rather than simply mouth the empty "Islam is the solution" slogans of opposition.

But the best reason for getting over our fear of the Islamist bogey is that we have no choice. The West can continue to back despotic regimes in the Middle East that will fail dramatically one day — either because they are incapable of reform or because of ham-fisted efforts by autocrats to hand power to their sons. Under these circumstances, Islamists will come to power anyway and be much less open to arguments about the virtues of democracy.

Anthony Bubalo and Greg Fealy are co-authors of a recently published Lowy Institute paper, *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia*.