

Winfried Weck: The Misconception of Freedom. Islam and Democratic Development in Indonesia

It is not only the size of Indonesia that is fascinating. What is also impressive is its ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity and the tolerance among the different religions that has once been proverbial in this Islamic country. But where does the republic stand today? With more than 225 million inhabitants, Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world, and with 190 million Muslims it is the biggest Islamic country. 23 million Indonesians are Christians, 1.8 percent are Hindus, and 2.5 million are Buddhists. As the state ideology, *pancasila*, says, all these communities make up the religious foundation of the country.

When the starting gun for democracy went at the end of the Suharto era, radical forces were among those given an opportunity to articulate themselves. As most of these forces reject democracy, they constitute a serious threat to Indonesia's young democracy, given their influence on the poor segments of the population.

It was as early as the 10th century that Islam reached the islands of the Indonesian Archipelago which, due to their topography, were part of an extensive trading network. The new religion succeeded in establishing itself gradually in a peaceful process. After striking roots in Gujarat and Bengal, Islam soon became a political and geographical factor in the Buddhist north of Sumatra. The development of an 'Indonesian Islam' was determined by four factors: First, the dogma that took its way east via India was a hybrid of Sunnite and Shiite elements which now spread in a region with syncretic world religions. Second, having resolved its internal disputes over key questions, Islam already showed monolithic traits back then. Third, this kind of Islam encountered certain forms of Buddhism and Hinduism which themselves had blended with the content of the people's natural religions. And fourth, these religions were defined less by their precepts than by their range of traditional social norms and codes.

Nevertheless, Indonesian Islam developed into two directions: Outside of Java, the code of laws and commandments of Islam is constantly competing with traditional customs, as the preservation of traditional cultural elements shows. Javanese Islam, on the other hand, is the religion of almost all inhabitants of Java; however, the Javanese have their own firmly rooted culture which plays a leading role in the Indonesian state. Even the script of the Javanese language and the names of Islamic rites are of Hindu origin.

In 1945, Mr Sukarno, the founder of the state, put Indonesia's polity on five pillars that were acceptable to most citizens: *Pancasila* includes the faith in one god, just and civilised humaneness, the unity of Indonesia, democracy, and social justice. However, the attempt to establish one common nation with the aid of the monotheist creed still is a demand that is unacceptable to conservative Islamic circles.

Since the time of Mr Sukarno, relations between Christians and Muslims have deteriorated. Drawing upon the *salafiyya*, a movement which fought against a pluralist interpretation of Islam, radical Islamic groups expressed their discontent with the *pancasila* in the seventies. Their concern was not only the renewal of Islam and the fight against the Western Christian enemy but also the transfer of the Arab and Middle Eastern culture to Indonesia. In the nineties, Islam started to hold its ground as an essential factor in the country.

Today, we may distinguish three main currents in Indonesian Islam: The *adat Muslims* in eastern and central Java are strongly bound by old customs. They understand Islam in its syncretic form.

The *national Muslims* follow an Islam that displays moderation and open-mindedness. And finally, the *value Muslims* are the conservative representatives of an unaltered and puritan Islam.

After the end of Mr Suharto's rule, the Indonesians learned how to handle their new liberties and rights as well as their obligations. However, radical groups also took advantage of their new sphere of action. It is a fact that only a few of the country's 190 million Muslims support radical Islamist ideas, and that even fewer belong to the groups that are prepared to use violence. Nevertheless, a strictly orthodox interpretation of Islam has established itself on the sly, gaining an alarming momentum.

Ever since the foundation of the Indonesian republic, orthodox Muslims have attempted to establish the Sharia as the legal basis of the state. In 1945, Mr Sukarno kept the Muslims' obligation to follow the Sharia from becoming part of the constitution. As late as 2002, the council of religious scholars and two Islamist political parties applied for the introduction of the Sharia, albeit unsuccessfully. However, in 1999 the *perda* gave provinces and regional corporations an opportunity to issue regional and local regulations, enabling them to implement an Islamic and/or Islamist interpretation of the national laws in their area of jurisdiction. Such regulations are certainly not issued by Islamist mayors or district chief executives but by representatives of the parties that support the state. President Bambang Yudhoyono, a practicing Muslim and secular defender of the *pancasila*, seems to tolerate this, as he depends on the support of the orthodox Muslims in his cabinet.

When, at Christmas 2004, parts of the region were devastated by a massive tsunami that claimed more than 200,000 lives, the disaster also had a positive effect: It was partly the pressure exerted by the international relief organisations which had come to the country to alleviate the consequences of the tragedy that brought about a rapprochement between the regional independence movement Free Aceh (GAM) and the Indonesian state, ending in the signing of a peace treaty. This treaty conceded the Aceh region a far-reaching autonomy while making sure that it remained within the Indonesian state. For the first time, the population of Aceh elected its provincial governor and numerous mayors in a democratic poll. It is remarkable that a gradual implementation of the Sharia in the region, which was once regarded as the 'balcony of Mecca', started as early as 1999, when a law permitted the regional government to base its decisions relating to religious life, education, and everyday life on the Sharia. However, as there was no dividing line between official jurisprudence and Islamic jurisdiction, conflicts occurred constantly. Moreover, jurisdiction on the basis of the Sharia had not answered the people's hope for more social justice.

Indonesia has acceded to diverse agreements on compliance with human rights – the agreement on abolishing the discrimination of women in 1984, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2006. However, the state does not grant its citizens freedom of religion in the Western sense, as every citizen must belong to one of the officially recognised religions. What is also restricted is permeability among the religions. Thus, the council of religious scholars prohibited marriage between Muslims and people of another faith in 1980. In principle, the implementation of local regulations on the basis of the Sharia is problematic: It has thrown the population into legal uncertainty as the *perda* are enforced as local regulations although they are often contrary to national law: The citizens lose their trust in the power of the democratic and parliamentary legislative as it is reduced to absurdity by the arbitrariness of local mayors.

According to Indonesian studies, most of the country's 190 million Muslims support the introduction of the Sharia; one in ten Muslims regards extremist terror as legitimate. Yet 80

percent believe in democracy and most Muslims think that democracy, Islam, and *pancasila* are compatible. In the 2004 elections, Islamist political parties won 42 percent of the vote, but they do not constitute a uniform block. The nationalist parties that support the state and defend *pancasila*, democracy, and pluralism are quite distinct from the radical Islamic parties that reject *pancasila* as Indonesia's national identity.

What Indonesia urgently needs is a clarification of the misconception of freedom – the people's freedom to organise themselves and to voice their interests. If these interests aim at abolishing pluralism and democracy, democracy must resist. Eight years after the country's democratisation, most Muslims appreciate the special role of the constructive coexistence between democracy and Islam. To them, the question is not whether Islam has a function in the fabric of Indonesia's democracy but what function it has.