

The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations: Political Islam in Indonesia and Iran

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“Islam’s borders are bloody, and so are its innards.”
(Huntington 1996: 258)

“The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choice-less singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable.” (Sen 5)

“If you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity and women’s rights can coexist, go to Indonesia.” (Hillary Clinton, qtd. in Kurlantzick 1)

During the research process of this paper, I attempted to explain my research findings to a friend. I told him that this past year Indonesia had elected a secular president and majority secular parties to the legislature. In reply, he said, “So then is Indonesia less Islamic now?” Underlying this question is the assumption that Islam is inherently problematic, inherently dangerous, and leads to radical politics. This assumption is present throughout society, beneath stereotypes that are often difficult to perceive. The task of this project, therefore, is to uncover this type of thinking and replace it with a new vision of political Islam that is more inclusive.

The stereotypical view of Islam does not take into account many important cultural and political factors that help to shape Islamic societies. Nor does it acknowledge the wide diversity within Islamic

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culture. In order to challenge Western stereotypes about Islam, I examine Islam within two very different countries, Iran and Indonesia. Even though both of these countries are strongly Islamic and in many ways have similar histories, their political manifestations of Islam are extremely different. This difference is a result of social and political factors, demonstrating that Islam cannot automatically produce a single cultural outcome. Within this context, I will examine the recent elections as an example of the different ways that political Islam interacts with the state.

This project is important for a variety of reasons. First, it is necessary to challenge the common image of Islam as portrayed by the popular media. By spreading this image, the media offers a single version of Islam in place of an extremely diverse and pluralistic tradition. Reframing the coverage of Islam to cover other aspects of the Muslim world would help to decrease the cultural bias that has been created in the west by expanding our understanding of Islam throughout the world. Understanding the pluralistic and diverse nature of the Muslim world challenges the idea that there is one single Islam. It also helps to show that religion generally, or Islam in particular, is not the only source of identity for Muslim people. Instead there are other social divisions that often times have a much greater influence on the decisions people make and the way they chose to live their lives (Sen 2006: 2). In the end, the goal of this project is to get rid of “the insistence, if only implicitly, on a choice-less singularity of a human identity (that) not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable” (Sen 2006: 5).

Research Methods

The main research method that I used throughout this project was historical analysis. This research examined the historical trajectories of Indonesia and Iran and identified important social, political and economic factors that helped to create the current political situation in both of those countries today. Performing historical analysis rejects the Huntingtonian view that Islam has inherent characteristics that determine a certain outcome.

The process of completing my research is just as much a part of the overall story as the data that I ended up collecting. When I began researching Indonesia, I could not find any scholarly work discussing

the relationship between political Islam and the Indonesian state. I did find a good deal of primary sources, including Islamic organization websites, geographical reports on urbanization and population migration, and election results that all helped to tell a story. The open nature of the Indonesian government allowed me to access a large amount of information, and although it was not the type of information I originally expected to find, it was even more interesting. My research on Indonesia makes use of population distribution statistics, election results and voting patterns, Islamic organization websites, and urban policy reports.

On the other hand, after about two months of research on Iran I had not been able to find the type of information I originally thought would be available in English. Frustrated, I contacted scholars in Iranian or Islamic studies from George Washington and American University asking for their help in identifying works that might be of use to me. One of the professors gave me the names of two professors from Iran that he had worked with in the United States. I emailed both of them, and they replied that they were unaware of any work in that field, especially in English. They were, on the other hand, very friendly and offered to answer to the best of their ability any questions that I had. Dr. Yasar responded, "There is no sufficient and reliable data in the case in question. Accordingly you have chosen a very difficult case. Consequently if you can change your case I recommend it" (30 Nov. 2009). Dr. Ahmed offered similar advice, noting "I could not find any English documents, information directly related to the topic as I understand it...Speaking as a layman the provision is very poor and inadequate as well as it has not been institutionalized yet" (5 Dec. 2009)¹. At that point I was planning on sending them a list of questions that I wanted to ask about Iran, but later decided that was not a plausible idea due to the current political climate in Iran.

From that point forward, my research on Iran changed to examining what information was available, mainly reports from worldwide news media on the results and protests of the summer 2009 election. The availability of this information led elections to be the major topic of my paper, and also served well as a contrast to the situation in Indonesia. Although there are a large number of news stories involving the Iranian elections, there was almost no information

from within the country that I could find. In the middle of this process I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Mary Desjeans, a Director of Intelligence at the CIA, and asked her if she could think of or provide any additional sources of information. She confirmed my sense that obtaining information from Iran is almost impossible. This conclusion has ended up playing an important role in my paper, demonstrating the nature of the government in Iran.

In the end, the largest obstacle to my research was my location. Unfortunately I could not travel to Iran or Indonesia to conduct research on the ground there. If I had been able to, I am sure my research would look very different. From the constraints of my desk in Charleston, South Carolina, I have presented a necessarily incomplete but nonetheless interesting story. The open nature of the Indonesian government and ability to access information from all sectors of society shows a good deal about the degree of social freedom it allows. On the other hand, the inability to access information from within the Iranian state, as well as the possibility of placing others in danger to find out that information, shows a lot about the restrictions on social liberties put in place by the Iranian government.

The research methodology that I have been forced to use to gather data itself reinforces the conclusion of my study: two Islamic states with comparable histories have produced two extremely different results. In this way, this paper examines the different “social constructions” of Islam, or the way that Islam has developed within different societies, shaping to social norms and taking part in dialogues between different power structures. Rather than assuming that Islam determines the shape of a culture, this paper will focus on the way it has manifested in social and political contexts, interweaving with all other aspects of political society. In the end, this paper will show that Islam evidently does not lead to predetermined outcomes, for despite their strongly Islamic orientation these two states have responded to social and economic factors in completely different ways.

The Conversation

By opposing the idea that Islam has developed as the result of a single inherent nature, I am entering into a conversation that has been continuing for decades. The main point of discussion in this conversation is the nature of Islam. On one side, there are proponents

who argue that there is something essential about Islam, and therefore Islamic societies, that make them opposed to Western culture. Scholars including Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis have perpetuated this point throughout the academic world. This view has been further spread throughout popular society by the mass media, leaving a deep impression on our political culture. On the other side of this question, scholars such as Nikki Keddie, Edward Said and Amartya Sen help us to see that essentialist views distort the reality of Islamic cultures and aggravate rifts between the Arab and Western worlds. My position falls on the latter side of the argument, and it is upon this basis that my understanding of the situation is founded.

Samuel Huntington is one of the most well-known and renowned scholars in international affairs. His work is widely cited in political science literature and he is often a player in political policy circles. In a 1993 article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Huntington developed his influential idea of the “clash of civilizations.” His hypothesis is “that the fundamental source of conflict” in the future world “will be cultural” rather than national or political differences (22). From Huntington’s perspective, civilizations are differentiated by a number of cultural characteristics, the most important being religion. Each civilization has different views regarding a set of crucial concepts such as the relationship between “God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state...as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy” (25). According to Huntington, the different perspectives on these concepts are principally determined by religion.

Although Huntington separates the world into a number of different civilizations based on religion, the main conflict is between “the West and the Rest,” by which he means “the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values” (41). This conflict is a result of Western-dominated political and economic policy, which has often exploited other civilizations. The other civilizations are now responding and fighting back against Western dominance, and this creates political conflict. In the end of his paper, Huntington concludes that “differences between civilizations are real and important; civilization consciousness is increasing; conflict between civilizations will supplant ideological and other forms of conflict as

the dominant global form of conflict” (48). Therefore, not only are these differences real and the main factors creating global conflict, they are also increasing and their role will be even more substantial in the future. Huntington especially focuses on conflict between the West and the Islamic world (48).

Another important author representing this side of the discussion is Bernard Lewis, one of the central figures in Middle Eastern studies and a professor at Princeton University. A specialist on the interaction between Islam and the West, he has been an advisor to a number of policy makers. In 1990, Lewis wrote an article published in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” The title itself says a good deal about the content of the article. By ascribing “rage” to Muslim culture, Lewis adopts a neutral privileged position, as if he can see above the fray, unlike enraged Islamic radicals. Lewis states that Muslim hatred of the West goes beyond specific policies or incidents. According to him, Muslims simply reject the principles and values of Western civilization, perceiving them as “innately evil, and those who promote or accept them as the enemies of God” (18). Like Huntington, Lewis sees real conflict and differences between Western and Islamic nations and believes that they play an important role in defining political conflict today. Additionally, he accepts that there is an inherent difference between the two civilizations that causes them to clash in this way.

In searching for the cause of conflict between Islamic and Western nations, Lewis identifies a number of factors. He points out that Western-style economic and political policies have often brought poverty and tyranny to Muslims, so it would be a natural consequence that they would resent the West (25). Imperialism, however, is not the real cause of the problem. According to Lewis, the real enemy for the Islamic world is secularism and modernism, which the West represents abundantly (25). As a result, this conflict represents a “clash of civilizations” caused by the Islamic world’s hatred of the West and its values, an “irrational reaction against a rival” (26). The West, he argues, must wait for the Muslim world to abandon its ineffective and irrational path of action and must be careful to not react in a similarly irrational manner.

Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington are two of the most

prominent scholars on Islam and the West in the scholarly world. Their works are heavily cited, and both have acted as commentators and advisors on important policy issues. They also both represent a similar strand of thinking that has played a major role in American political thinking. In the above-cited works, as well as other writings, they have made the case that there is an inherent conflict between Islam and the West. Within this opposition lies the major source of political and military conflict. The most important aspect of this argument is the sense that Islam is the source of the problem. The inherent nature of Islam, they argue, makes Islamic peoples and countries react to situations in the same way. This argument does not allow for diversity within the Muslim world, and leads to the conclusion that if “X” happens, Islam will react in a certain predictable way. The problem with this point of view is that it supports the conclusion that there is an “Islam” and a “West” and simplifies complex groupings of people into simply defined categories.

In addition to the impact these ideas have had in the scholarly world, the “clash of civilizations” concept has permeated into our popular political culture and news media as well. The media helps to spread this message of the West versus Islam, and portrays Islam and Islamic culture as inherently violent and opposed to Western values such as peace, freedom, and democracy. Examples of this trend may be found in essentially every area of mainstream media; however, for the purposes of this paper I have identified the magazine *Newsweek* as an excellent example of this trend. In general, I have found *Newsweek*'s articles to be well written and informative. Journalists such as Fareed Zakaria have helped to establish a reputation for being non-partisan and factual. *Newsweek* has a large subscription base (2,737,450 in 2008), making it the second largest magazine news source for Americans (Stateofthemedial.org). In light of its solid reputation and wide influence, it is especially significant that *Newsweek* has helped to propagate the “clash of civilizations” mentality, representing Islam as violent, fundamentalist, and anti-democratic. While there are other media sources that promote this image in a more blunt manner (such as FOX News), *Newsweek* essentially commits the same mistake, unknowingly.

There is no question that there is a security threat presented by the

existence of radical and violent Islamic groups. Following September 11, 2001, the United States has increasingly focused on rooting out violent Islam. President George W. Bush declared a “War on Terror,” and within the past two administrations the country has been fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Accordingly, the media has focused on this security threat presented by these situations, and the dialogue regarding Islam is set within this agenda. Since the main agenda concerning Islam is the security threat of militant groups, the focus of the media is generally radical Islam. By examining a number of *Newsweek* covers and articles from the past year, this situation becomes clear. From March 2009 to February 2010, headlining articles have included Fareed Zakaria’s “Radical Islam is a Fact of Life: How to Live with it” (“Radical” 25) and “After Iran gets the Bomb” (“Iran” 32), in addition to “The Mind of the Taliban: An Oral History from Behind Enemy Lines (Yousafzai),” and “The Mutating Extremist Threat” (Dickey), among others. Despite the very different stories each of these articles is telling, the main subject is radical Islam. This is the view through which the American public views Islam. Although many of these articles are aimed at better understanding Islam, or focusing on the cultural contexts rather than the religion itself, they are all still written within this agenda setting and priming of radical Islam.

The February 22 2010 issue of *Newsweek* was released with the title “The Jihad Against the Jihadis: How moderate Muslim leaders waged war on extremists – and won,” by Fareed Zakaria (“Jihad”). At first when I saw this cover, I thought that my perspective on how Islam was portrayed in the media was wrong, or at least that there were some serious exceptions to the rule. Once I read the article, however, I realized that it reinforced my point even further. The article discusses how the influence of violent Islam has been decreased by the strength of moderate Islam, and how jihadism has failed to capture the minds of the majority of Muslims. I was impressed with the article, and was excited to see a story about moderate Islam “winning.” In the end, however, this story is still talking about moderate Islam “winning” against radical Islam. Even a focus on moderate Islam is within the context of radical Islam, and relates to the agenda setting of the security threat. This article is an example of how the framing of the issue may have changed, a shift away from radical Islam as being the

dominant force within Islam and instead becoming weaker, but the priming and agenda setting have stayed the same. When it comes to Islam the media is still focusing on the radical, and the potential for security challenges, even if the story is about the radical becoming less important.

This article demonstrates that the media operates within this paradigm. Even though the story is the decline of radical Islam, the context is still radical Islam. Stories about Muslim citizens living peacefully with citizens of other religions or Muslim countries democratically electing secular presidents don't make the headlines. Of course they don't; that isn't exciting news. The media operates on tantalizing information that will sell papers, and conflict sells. This isn't to say that the conflict doesn't exist. It does and it is important to write about and understand it. On the other hand, the majority of Americans (myself included) receive their information about the world from the mainstream news media, and if that is the only image of Islam that is presented, it will dominate in society.

On the other side of this conversation are scholars such as Edward W. Said, Amartya Sen and Nikki Keddie. These scholars represent the view that there is not an inherent characteristic that makes Islam oppositional to the west. On the other hand, they examine social, political, economic and cultural circumstances that have led to the way Islam and the West have interacted. In general, they all reject the idea that there is one "West" and one "Islam" that can be easily identified. They focus on the plurality within Islam, and the way that societies are constructed as the result of social forces that lead to the world as we see it today.

Amartya Sen wrote "What Clash of Civilizations?" in 2006 as a response to Samuel Huntington's previously discussed article. Sen argues that the tendency to stereotype both Western and Islamic people is dangerous, because it makes "huge groups of people in the world...look peculiarly narrow and unreal" (par.1). The problem with Huntington's argument, he states, is that the civilization divisions he discusses are solely based on religion. Huntington assumes that religious identity fully defines a person, and that the main motivation of Islamic people is always an Islamic one. This vast over-simplification of giving "an automatic priority to the Islamic identity of a Muslim

person” puts too much emphasis on Islam, and results in “profound misunderstanding” (par. 2). Violence and misunderstanding are only increased by this “single-dimensional categorization” of humans, drawing lines of conflict across religious boundaries with little regard for any other factors (par. 3).

An attribution of total consequence to religion ignores many other important aspects of everyday life that can help to understand the world in a better way. Sen argues that Huntington ignores other divisions (such as rich and poor, members of different classes and residential locations, language groupings, etc.) that often times are more powerful motivators than religious belief. Instead, Huntington simplifies peoples’ complex lives into one category: their religion. Another important aspect of this understanding of people is the fact that certain characteristics are automatically attributed to a person’s religious affiliation. For example, in the West the idea of “the moderate Muslim” is automatically associated with a Muslim who is more tolerant politically. Sen says that even this attribution is giving too much power to religion. Someone can be a devoutly pious Muslim (or adherent of any religion) and also have tolerant politics. Religion is not the sole determining factor.

Sen believes that thinking this way makes the world a more dangerous place. The importance of this point has important implications for the future. Drawing borders based on religion only creates misunderstanding, stereotypes and automatic judgment, and decreases the space for learning, understanding, and communication. If absolutist statements are taken at face value, then the desire for communication, understanding and compromise disappears. As Sen states at the conclusion of his article, “The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choice-less singularity of a human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable” (par 18).

Edward Said wrote another important critique of Huntington’s argument that helps build the foundation for this side of the conversation. In his 2001 article “The Clash of Ignorance,” Said criticizes both Huntington and Lewis for their simplified personification of the entities called “the West” and “Islam” for assuming that there could even be a single entity containing both of these extremely diverse worlds (par. 3). Labels such as “Islam” and “the West” create

categories that are easily identifiable and explained, but they “mislead and confuse the mind” into thinking that there is a simple answer to a complex and messy reality (par. 8).

Stereotyped divisions such as Huntington’s emphasize the different and ignore the similar. As Said says, “there are closer ties between apparently warring civilizations than most of us would like to believe,” but focusing on these fluid similarities is too confusing (par. 12). Rather, it is much easier to focus on the easily identifiable categories such as good versus evil, which provide us with “practical guidelines for situations such as the one we face now” (par. 12). This type of rhetoric was embodied after the September 11 attacks, creating a crusade against a single enemy, with a clear objective and victory in sight. These vast abstractions, however, do not help to better understand the world around us or come to effective solutions. In the end, Said says that they are “a gimmick like ‘the War of the Worlds,’ better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time” (par. 15).

Nikki Keddie does not directly address Huntington’s argument; however, she exemplifies the type of research that Sen and Said both call for. In *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution*, Keddie discusses the origins of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the general revolutionary nature of the Iranian state. The primary argument in the book is that one cannot understand the Iranian revolution by simply focusing on Islam, but should instead focus on the social and economic forces that caused the seemingly religious upheaval. In order to explain the causes of the Iranian revolution, Keddie identifies the contradiction between an increasingly autocratic political structure and forced, inequitable and rapid socioeconomic changes that alienated almost all classes (4). Thus the rejection of the Shah’s reign and strength of Khomeinism was not a call for increased religiosity, but a response to social and economic circumstances. Additionally, the Iranian rejection of the West had its roots in political conditions rather than an inherent conflict of values. This is supported by the fact that when Iran had little contact with the West, the revolution of 1905-11 brought in a new Westernized regime. At that time the enemy was a traditionalist government, so the people were attracted to the opposite. On the other hand, in 1978-9 the enemy was the increasingly westernized Shah, so

discontent found a home in the opposite of that, a return to traditional Islam (6). Additionally, Keddie describes Islamism as a movement that appeals to marginalized populations, rejecting cultural colonization of the West that failed to incorporate them into the modern sector (10).

Keddie's argument demonstrates the political and economic factors that caused the Iranian revolution and the rejection of Western culture. Her analysis avoids placing the emphasis on Islam and rather finds other important causal factors. This argument supports the cases made by Sen and Said by showing that there was not something inherent about Islam or the West that made Iranians reject Western policy, but that this rejection was a result of social and economic circumstances. From this point of view, Iranian culture and revolution cannot simply be attributed to its Islamic nature, but other social and economic factors must be considered as well.

This paper serves to show a different side of Islam that is not usually portrayed by the mainstream media. Although the Iranian elections of the summer of 2009 were widely covered due to the scandal associated with them, the peaceful democratic elections in Indonesia that same year were ignored. I am not trying to discount the violent realities in many countries, such as Iran, or say that covering these issues is not important. On the contrary, by highlighting the situations in both of these countries I will show that politics in an Islamic state can represent radical ideas as well as peaceful ones, and both should be portrayed to the general public. If we can shift our agenda, broaden our observations to include social and economic factors, and reject the notion that there is one "Islam" with a predetermined nature, then we have a much better chance of understanding the world around us. Islamic cultures are vastly diverse, and by using the examples of Iran and Indonesia, I will demonstrate just how different they can be.

Elections

Elections can serve as an important sector of political society to display the impact of social factors in the development of governmental politics. This section is important for two main reasons. First, the election results from Indonesia in 2009 demonstrate that an Islamic country can hold democratic elections that lead to the election of a secular president and a secular majority in the parliament. These results show that one cannot automatically assume that Islam will be

the main factor leading to political results, or that people who hold Islamic beliefs and are involved in Islamic life will always support Islamic politics. Second, the differences between the way that Iran and Indonesia administered their elections shows the differences between these two governments. Therefore, this section helps to display that Islam cannot always be considered the most important factor in a population's decision making. On the other hand, these results show that other factors, including urban and rural differences or economic circumstances, have a stronger influence on voting than Islamic orientation.

Indonesia's Elections: 1999-2009

Indonesia is the fourth-largest populated country in the world, with a total of 240 million citizens throughout thousands of islands from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. Eighty-eight percent of the population is Muslim, leaving Indonesia with the largest Muslim population in the world. This being said, Indonesia is now a "Muslim model," for the blending of democracy and secularism within an Islamic country (Kurlantzick 1). The past two election cycles have both yielded large majorities for secular parties, and help to show the complexities of Islam within the Indonesian state, created by its unique historical circumstances.

Indonesia held its first presidential elections in 1999, when Abdurrahman Wahid was elected as president. Since that time, Indonesia has created a secular democracy in which a plethora of different parties are allowed to exist, from hard-line Islamic to secular. The fact that this range is able to exist is an excellent indication of the political freedoms within the Indonesian state. Additionally, this democracy has led towards a trend of support for secular parties above Islamic inspired parties of all kinds, including Muslim-Brotherhood inspired urban parties (Mujani and Liddle 576). The trend towards secular parties has only increased in recent years, and is evident in examining the 2004 and 2009 presidential and local elections.

On April 5th 2004, over 147 million eligible voters participated in Indonesia's third genuinely democratic election. Voters chose candidates from over 24 different secular and Islamic parties. The national secular parties (Golkar and PDIP) won a combined 40% of the vote, in addition to the new secular Democratic Party's 7.45%.

On the other hand, the major Islamic parties (National Awakening Party and PPP) won a combined 18.72%, plus the new PKS with 7.34% and the National Mandate Party with 6.4%. (Fox 18). Overall, the Islamic parties ended up with around 33%, while secular parties took the majority of seats and the Presidency (Mujani 578). That year, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his newly created secular Democratic Party, created in 2002, won the presidency. Although the party only received 8% of the overall vote, his election to the presidency signaled the coming importance of this party.

The trend from the 2004 elections was continued in the elections of April 2009. In this election, the secular parties increased their overall support to 58%. In addition, the secular Democratic Party increased its support to 21%, and Yudhoyono held the presidency (Mujani 578). For Islamic oriented parties, on the other hand, support decreased. Overall support for Islamic parties fell from 33% in 2004 to 24% in 2009. Specifically, the new Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), a product of the *tarbiyah* movement², which was at first viewed as dangerous to the political system, has not increased its support. Their support remained at 7% in both 2004 and 2009, so the intense threat to political system did not materialize (Mujani 581). Both of these elections show a strong, and continued, move towards support of secular parties within Islamic Indonesia. This is evident both with the continued majority held by a combination of secular parties, as well as Yudhoyono's ability to hold on to the presidency. Overall this support is a result of successful economic policies and tangible corruption reform.

There are important conclusions to be drawn from the trends in both the 2004 and 2009 elections. One important point to address is the definition of secular parties in Indonesia. Secular parties in Indonesia identify with the state doctrine of Pancasila, including "belief in the one high God," which is incorporated into the Constitution. Therefore, even secular parties accept the fact that state policy should be responsive to the interests of religious constituencies. They do not, however, support the implementation of shari'a (Islamic law and code of conduct) in state policy, which separates them from Islamic parties (Mujani 578). At the moment, the Democratic Party is the most important secular party. This party was established in 2002 by president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and its support has increased by

almost three times over the past five years. Yudhoyono's reelection is a result of two main components; economic growth and anti-corruption policies. During the current regime tangible economic reform and unprecedented corruption prosecution have allowed this government to earn the public's trust (APCO World Wide 1).

For Islamic parties, their decline in support also has some important implications. There are two different degrees of Islamic parties in Indonesia. The first are PKB and PAN, secular parties that are linked to Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, the *Nehadtul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*. These parties are generally known for their pluralistic attitudes towards other Muslims and non-Muslims as well as their political flexibility (Mujani 580). The second group is made up of more hard-line Islamic groups, including PPP and PKS. PKS is the newest Islamic party, and it is the Indonesian version of the new Islamist parties that have emerged in many Muslim-majority countries in recent decades. Its roots are in the *tarbiyah* (education of Islamic consciousness) movement, and are strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood (Mujani 581). At first the establishment of this party was seen to be a threat to Indonesia's political system; however, it turned out to be a very important development for the Muslim world.

Allowing the PKS to be a political party gives a legal voice to an orientation of Islam that cannot be ignored. This orientation has often flourished when it has been suppressed, but when it is allowed to participate in the political process it is held accountable and must bend to the will of the public (Fox 19). Full participation of this party in the democratic process offers a helpful model for the coexistence of Islam and democracy. This is important because it shows that allowing radical parties to operate within the democratic system can have the effect of decreasing their power and impact. Once a party is allowed to operate within the political arena, the actual ability to serve the people is what really matters.

Overall, the trends through the 2004 and 2009 elections in Indonesia display the political freedom within the state and the impact of democratic elections on conservative Islamic parties. Although the results discussed above were primarily national, the same trend was seen throughout local elections as well (Mujani 583). One of the most important aspects of these elections is the freedom and plurality of the

national elections. A wide range of parties are allowed to participate, and the people's votes are actually represented in the election results. Second, there has been an overall trend towards secular parties and away from Islamic parties. Islam has not lost support within the state, yet the world's largest population of Muslims is looking towards secular parties. This support of secular government is a result of actual tangible results of improvement in social services, paired with a functional system of Islamic social organizations throughout the state. Last, the ability for more conservative tarbiyah parties, such as the PKS, to participate as a legal party in the elections makes the group more accountable, and may provide some important insights for the remainder of the Muslim world.

Iranian Elections 2009

Comparing the Iranian elections with the Indonesian ones from the same year provides a number of important insights into how different these two countries are. One of the key contrasts presented is the varying degrees of political freedom within the states, including the number and type of parties that are allowed to participate as well as the degree of voter participation. The most important component within this aspect is whether or not the peoples' voice was actually represented through the voting box. Last, the amount of information available to the general public regarding these two elections demonstrates a good deal about the open or closed nature of the two societies. Overall, the vast differences between the two elections highlight the lack of a single predetermined outcome due to Islam's presence in these countries' societies.

On June 12 2009, Iran held its presidential election between reformist candidate Hussein Moussavi and incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This election was important for a number of reasons, and the results are still being debated. International debate has focused on this election and the actions of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The results of this election, and the election process itself, display some very important aspects of the Iranian government and the role that Islam plays in politics. Additionally, the world has been able to see a new current within Iranian society, and better understand some of the tensions within the country.

Iran is an officially Islamic republic, combining religion and the state with the rule of the supreme leader, and various clerics that are part of the government. Additionally, the constitution mandates that the president must be a Shi'ite Muslim (Bruno 3). Religious values and the degree to which those values will be enforced is frequently part of a president's platform. While religious values are important in Iran, political rhetoric has at times over emphasized its role in elections. In actuality, for many Iranians the main factor that influences most voters within the state is the provision of social services. Although the Iranian state is a "strong" state in the sense of consolidated power and military controlled borders, its ability to formulate coherent public policy and implement that policy effectively, especially in some of the more rural areas (Gheessari 11). This leads to voters heavily weighing their voting choices based on the provision of social services, rather than on the religious rhetoric of radical Islam.

Preparing for the 2009 elections, nearly 500 candidates applied for candidacy with the Guardian Council, which must approve all candidates. The Council only approved four, disqualifying hundreds of reformist candidates before the primary elections (Bruno 3). In Indonesia, on the other hand, citizens were able to choose from 24 different parties. The pre-selection of candidates by the Guardian Council has led some Iranians to feel that they do not have a genuine choice among the candidates (Congressional Research Service 4). The four candidates that were approved were president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, conservative Mohsen Reza'i, reformist Hussein Moussavi, and reformist Mehdi Karrubi. Public activity before this year's election was especially energetic and more voters were motivated to come out to the polls than in the recent past. There were multiple reasons for this energy, including a failure to deliver the economic progress that Ahmadinejad promised in the last election, and the crackdown on social freedoms that he has initiated over the past for years (Congressional Research Service 3).

Record numbers of voters took to the polls in this election, and especially high turnout was reported in support of Moussavi, one of the reformist candidates. Many voters felt that for the first time they actually had a candidate who would implement economic and social change, and that their voices might actually be heard (Arjomand

2009)³. An important factor that fueled this energy was the first ever-presidential debates that were aired by the Iranian media. An estimated 40 to 50 million viewers tuned in to see the candidates debate important issues, and learn more about the candidates' positions (Addis 3). Reformist sentiment was most visible in urban areas; however, the trend was also present in rural areas throughout the country. The night before the election, Moussavi supporters formed a human chain on a main street of Tehran, showing their support for the reform candidate and their disapproval of Ahmadinejad (Addis 4).

During the week leading up to the election, some reports began to show that rural and urban poor populations were beginning to shift their support away from Ahmadinejad and towards Moussavi. This shift was attributed to increases in inflation and unemployment, worsened by internal sanctions and the global financial crisis that had major affects on the poor (Addis 4). One excellent example of this shift occurred in Dast-E Arzhan, a small community in the central Fars province. In the 2005 election, Ahmadinejad had received a large amount of support from this province, campaigning on promises to help spread the wealth to these rural areas. However, many of this town's 3,000 residents pledged to support Moussavi the week before the election. They said that Ahmadinejad did not deliver what he promised, and that they are worse off since he has been in power. Hadi Bahadri, a 20-year-old resident says that since Ahmadinejad "People have less money to spend. Moussavi will cure the economy... [he] will make our lives more free" (qtd. in Erdbrink 2). Another resident, Samad Raesi, said that if Ahmadinejad won the election, the future does not look promising. "His decisions are unprofessional. Everything, our freedoms, the economy, will become much, much worse" (qtd. in Erdbrink 2). Other members of the town have less idealistic reasons for voting for Moussavi, such as Ali Ghorbani. Ali stated, "Ahmadinejad has only made promises. I did not get a job, so I will not vote for him" (qtd. in Erdbrink 2).

These types of sentiments were felt in other areas of the country, and on the day of the elections many were optimistic that Moussavi had a chance of winning the presidency, or that it would at least be a very close race. Pro-reformist voters who had boycotted elections in the past showed up to the ballot boxes in large numbers to support

Moussavi (Addis 4). Although many believed the election would be extremely close, less than three hours after the polls closed the Interior Ministry announced that Ahmadinejad had won with 62% of the vote, where as Moussavi had only captured 34% (Worth 1). This landslide victory for Ahmadinejad came as a huge shock as reports of reformist support had shown much higher numbers. Additionally, some reports suggest that in some cases ballot boxes were picked up by the Interior Ministry before polling places closed, and also that it would be impossible to count all of the ballots in such a short time (Addis 6). Shortly after the results were announced, Moussavi issued a statement that he rejected them and called upon Ayatollah Khamenei to launch an investigation (Worth 1). Conservative candidate Moshen Ressa'i also filed formal complaints, which made Moussavi's complaints more legitimate (Addis 5). When Khamenei responded, however, he ended any chance of an investigation by congratulating Ahmadinejad and calling on the other candidates to support him.

At this point, the major protesting began. Despite government bans on unauthorized public gatherings, the demonstrations continued. The government placed restrictions on foreign and domestic journalists, shut down mobile phone networks, limited access to a number of Internet sites (particularly Twitter and Face Book) and made a wave of mass arrests (Addis 1). Tear gas was used against the demonstrators as they claimed that Ahmadinejad had stolen the election (Worth 1). Many felt that there was no way that the record 39 million votes cast could have been counted in such a short time, and the Ahmadinejad and Khamenei had called the election without counting all the votes (Addis 6). Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist cleric and candidate, said that the "results of the 10th presidential election are so ridiculous and so unbelievable that one cannot write or talk about it" (Worth 2). Moussavi supporters, including women, young people, intellectuals and members of the moderate clerical establishment, marched through central Tehran chanting "Death to the dictator!" The opposition's message resonated throughout the world, and cast doubts about the legitimacy of the Iranian elections.

June 2009's elections have had major effects on Iranian society, and can help to show a good deal about the nature of the state. At first, onlookers worried that the elections had permanently damaged a

call for reform. As 20-year-old Mashid expressed, “From now on, we won’t vote. They have insulted our feelings of patriotism” (Worth 3). This sentiment, however, has not been the predominant force since the elections. Shortly following the elections, a group of moderate clerics, the Association of Researches and Teachers of Qum, called the election and the government illegitimate, displaying an important crack in the clerical establishment (Slackman 1). Throughout the fall months small protests continued, and a new wave of large protests began again in December. Tens of thousands of students protested at the University of Tehran, shouting “Death to the oppressor, whether it’s the shah or the leader!” (Dareini1). The Green Movement, as the opposition is being called, has now moved further than its original goal of protesting the elections, and now is focusing on reforming the Iranian government system itself. Despite the repression, arrests, reports of torture, show trials and militarization of the regime, nothing has been able to stop this movement (Wright 1).

The story of these elections can help to show a good deal about the state of Iran right now, most obviously that the government has grown increasingly oppressive. This is evident from the motivations of voters to support Moussavi in order to increase their freedoms, as well as the intense crackdowns by the government following the arrests. As Mary F. Desjeans, an analyst from the CIA explained, Kahmenei and Ahmadinejad are looking back at the 1979 Revolution, and trying to avoid the mistakes that the shah made during that time. They believe that more intense crackdowns will prevent the opposition from regrouping, and in effect crush their efforts (Mary Desjeans). This type of crackdown has also gone to a new length in stopping free expression, especially with the Internet and restricted access to social networking sites.

Within the context of the repressive Iranian government, Islam functions in a very different way than in Indonesia. In Iran, the Guardian Council decides the few candidates that may run, and bars many reformist candidates from even entering the election. In Iran, it is worth repeating, there is no transparency. Government restrictions on journalists and telecommunications made it very difficult to fully understand the election. The ballot counting process and subsequent investigation were completely closed off, so even the Iranian public

has no idea what really happened. In the end, however, no matter how “strong” the Iranian state has made its stance against the protestors, the opposition has not stopped. This shows that the Iranian state is losing its grip on the public, and is not representing many of its citizens. Without support from the public, the Iranian government cannot really be considered to be a legitimate state. As former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani commented, “suppression is not the way to run a country” (Dareini 3).

It is especially significant that Islam was not extensively discussed in the election; Iranian voters focused instead on social service provision, economic development, civil and social rights and government transparency. This observation is important for a number of reasons, and demonstrates one of the key aspects of political Islam in Iran. To begin with, Iran is a strongly Islamic country. As a result, Islamic identity is assumed of all political leaders, and the clergy plays an important role in the governmental system. Therefore, it is not a question of whether or not the government will follow an Islamic model, or whether a candidate will have strong Islamic faith, for both of these are basic characteristics of this state.

On the other hand, however, my research shows that the election had little to do with Islam. Moussavi ran on a platform of social change, of reforming the social instructions and granting more civil rights, which in some cases may go against some conservative Islamic ideals and customs. To some key groups, including women, these reforms were central to their support of Moussavi. These reforms, however, did not indicate that these people were becoming less Islamic, or that their faith was diminishing. Voters weren’t turning out to the ballot boxes to vote on Islam; they were voting on the every-day challenges that are just as much a part of their lives as citizens of any other state.

In the case of Iran, religious rhetoric is so prominent that Islam is often times assumed to be the main social motivator. This rhetoric is used by the government as a tool for mobilizing support as well as for chastising the opposition. Additionally, the reformists use this rhetoric as a new vision for the future, a new imagined image of Islam. And in the end, the Western media, who constantly continue this cycle through sensationalist news coverage of the Islamic world, further sustains this rhetoric. When this situation is more closely examined

with a critical eye, however, it becomes clear that although Islam is an extremely important social force within Iran, the elections of 2009 were about much more than religion.

Conclusions

Those who accept the premise that there is an inherent character of Islam are more likely to believe that all Islamic states must behave in the same way. Throughout this paper, I have questioned this notion. After a careful examination of ways in which Islam interacts with the government in Iran and Indonesia, I have come to the conclusion that Islam is not the all encompassing motivator it is often times portrayed to be. Instead, this investigation has shown that social factors, more than any religious principle, have caused the relationship between Islam and the state, eliminating the possibility of any inherently Islamic set of outcomes.

Studying the election process of states is an excellent indicator of the nature of a state, including the mechanism of its government and the social freedom of its people. In addition, the outcomes of elections serve as an indicator for the beliefs and needs of the people. Indonesia and Iran both held elections in 2009, and the results were extremely different. On the one hand, Indonesia held democratic elections leading to the election of a secular president and a majority of secular parties. The elections were democratic and peaceful, and the validity of the result has not been questioned. Iran, on the other hand, held elections whose results were highly contested. Following the results of the elections protests broke out throughout the country, and the opposition was met with violent repression. To this day, the events during and results of this election are still widely unknown. Comparing these two elections demonstrates that these states could not be more different.

In conclusion, the role of Islam in the Indonesian and Iranian states is a result of the socially constructed circumstances created by the interaction with the state. As a result of history and politics, Islam has been shaped in two very different ways in these two countries. This is the key point at the conclusion of this project. If there were something inherent about Islam, then the results in these two states would be relatively similar. In reality, however, they are extremely different. This difference shows that Islam does not have an automatic outcome.

Islam, just like all religions, is a human institution. Its manifestations are determined by the way that societies have been constructed over time, rather than by intrinsic characteristics. Understanding this point is important for two main reasons. First, is that by stripping away the automatic assumption of Islam, the real cause of the problems may be better understood, then real solutions can be constructed.

Understanding this point can help to decrease stereotypes and the tension that they cause. It is worth pointing out that in both the elections I have studied, Western powers intervened on a number of levels to protect their own political and military interests. Distrust and resentment of Western powers today must be understood within this context. Rather than assuming Muslim people automatically hate the West, one must view the social context in which some of these sentiments developed. If Islam is assumed to have certain characteristics no matter what, then there is no hope for understanding or reconciliation in the future. These blanket stereotypes lead to hatred and mistrust, a sentiment that is not only ignorant, but can also be harmful. On the other hand, if the time can be taken to understand the societal constructions behind the manifestation of Islam today, we can realize that there is no clash of civilizations, and work to solve the real problems that are facing our world today.

Notes

¹ The names of these professors have been changed as a precaution. They are both professors in Iran, and the inserted quotations are their direct words from email conversations I had with them from November-December 2009.

² The PKS is the Indonesian version of new Islamist parties that have recently emerged in many Muslim-majority countries. These parties are based on the *tarbiyah* movement, which calls for “education in the sense of Islamic-consciousness raising.” This movement has been a powerful force, especially in prestigious secular state universities from the 1970’s to present (Mujani and Liddle 581).

³ This source is an interview that I conducted with Sanaz Arjomand in the fall of 2009. She is a student at the College of Charleston, and both an Iranian and American citizen. During the interview, she told me about her

recent trip to Iran during the summer of 2009. She visited Tehran to vote in the elections, and then spent a few weeks there visiting her family who still lives there. The information she provided me was based on her personal experience, opinion and insights during her time in Iran.

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