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WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP (IF ANY) OF THE 'ARAB SPRING' WITH SIMULTANEOUS PROTESTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?

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references based on MLA format.)

Introduction

The mass protests against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East from December 2010 onwards, known as the Arab Spring, found some resonance in the Southeast Asian region¹. We will look at whether there is a relationship with demonstrations in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Indonesia, a “Muslim-majority country”, was governed undemocratically for over three decades, similar to the Arabic countries mentioned above². But a significant uprising against “corruption, collusion, and nepotism” manifested itself in 1997, and the economy “steadily strengthened after [Indonesian ruler] Suharto’s ouster”, two years later, thus stabilising the nascent democracy³. Events in the late 1990s rather than 2011 mirror the Arab Spring.

Due to a “cultural bond”, political events within “the Arab world” have always had repercussions on Malaysia⁴. But the country’s Prime Minister during the Arab Spring, Najib Razak, used to pride himself with the country’s philosophy of moderation and “national unity” as the core tenets of the ‘*1Malaysia*’ policy, a rhetoric which also served to minimise protests occurring parallel to the Arab Spring⁵. Albeit, there may have been some bandwagon effect of Malaysia’s 2011 ‘*Bersih 2.0*’ rally with a view on the Middle East.

¹ see Saidin, 2018, 121

² see Pepinski, 2012, 1

³ Derichs, 2012, 7-9; Miller & Martini, 2013, 32; Aras & Ekim, 2015, 1

⁴ Bakar, 2012, 743-744

⁵ Aras & Ekim, 2015b, 1

A View on Indonesia

In spite of corruption and sectarian strain, political rankings have portrayed Indonesia as one of “the most democratic of any Muslim-majority countries since the 2000s”⁶. In recent years, public support for authoritarianism has been minimal, and democracy has solidified⁷. The economy proved robust and has been showing high growth rates⁸. What is more, both civil society and the political establishment “do genuinely want to improve issues of accountability, rule of law, and social justice”⁹.

When it comes to the consequences of the Arab Spring, rather than mirroring the situation in the Arabic countries affected, the much earlier Indonesian “*Reformasi*” movement of Spring 1998 actually parallels the Arab Spring”¹⁰. In fact, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lauded “Indonesia’s democratization as the ideal model for the Arab Spring”¹¹.

Political ramifications, not least in connection with *Reformasi*, are such that fundamentalist forces are putting pressure on the Indonesian government to introduce Islamic law¹². Politics in Indonesia have been “characterised by competition between different populisms” upholding a system of oligarchy¹³. Corruption is pronounced¹⁴. “[S]upport for ... norms of social justice and rule of law” is humble¹⁵. In the recent past, there have been attacks on economically prominent ethnic Chinese population and Christians¹⁶.

Public support for Islamist parties has been comparably low, but some observers suggest that in perspective, Islamists might be more fully integrated into politics¹⁷. The “Indonesian model”, i.e. the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, has been cited

⁶ Rienner citing Kubicek, 2015, 31

⁷ see Salehin, 2013, 91; Freedman & Tiburzi, 2012, 131; Miller & Martini, 2013, 13

⁸ Kimura, 2012, 186

⁹ Freedman & Tiburzi, 2012, 152-153

¹⁰ Pepinski, 2012, 12-13

¹¹ Hoesterey, 2013, 56

¹² Maghbraoui, 2016, 765

¹³ Hadiz & Robinson, 2017, 488

¹⁴ Freedman & Tiburzi, 2012, 151

¹⁵ idem, 152-153

¹⁶ Moghadam, 2013, 396

¹⁷ Miller, Martini, Larrabee e.a., 2012, 304; see also Pepinski, 2012, 11

as one to be emulated in the Arab World, with an accommodation of moderate Islamists¹⁸. Islamist parties have been cautious not to call for a broad “enforcement of Islamic codes”¹⁹.

From *Reformasi* and *Bersih* to a Malaysian Spring?

Reformation (*Reformasi*) in 1998 marked the beginning of “street protest and civil resistance in Malaysia”, followed by the peaceful “Clean” (*Bersih*) movement which attracted large youth following²⁰. Launched during the height of the Arab Spring in 2011, the *Bersih 2.0* rally was perceived by many observers “as an attempt to create a ‘Malaysian Spring’”²¹. However, the impact was punctual and, thus, much smaller than in the Arab World²².

Due to government fears, the Pan-Malaysian-Islamic Party (PAS) subsequently warned protesters not to attempt the ousting of the elected government, although the oppositional alliance incorporating PAS did call for a Malaysian Spring²³. The government was sharply denounced by protesters²⁴. *Bersih 2.0*, on 9 July 2011, was subdued by the authorities, with many arrests, thousands of injured and one casualty²⁵. The same month, the government announced that it would control social media to a larger extent, blocking an initial 300 Islamist websites²⁶.

The “student factor”, the high proportion of university attendees in the “anti-government demonstrations”, worried state officials²⁷. Although oppositional Maria Chin and Mohamad Sabu stressed the peaceful fashion of the protests and their being in line with previous protests, unaligned with the Arab Spring, political parties did mobilise “youth activists”²⁸.

¹⁸ Carnegie, 2014, 95 & 97; see Hoesterey, 2013, 60-61

¹⁹ Brookings, 2015, 5; see Carnegie, 2014, 101

²⁰ Saidin, 2018, 123

²¹ idem, 121; see idem, 123

²² idem, 121

²³ idem, 122; Brookings, 2015, 16-17

²⁴ Brookings, 2015, 16-17

²⁵ Currie, 2012, 296-297

²⁶ Freedom House, 2012, 4-6

²⁷ Bakar, 2012, 743

²⁸ Saidin, 2018, 122

According to research done by Saidin, most young Malaysians back democratic elections and stability instead of “civil disobedience” to topple the country’s leadership²⁹. More than half of Malaysian activists expressed a neutral or negative attitude towards the term “Malaysian Spring” and supported a “democratic political system” in the country, and more than a quarter took a neutral position³⁰. Since most stated sympathies for the Arab Spring, one must note that a certain overlap between the protests in the Arab world and those in Malaysia exists; a total of 49.2 percent of Malaysian activists said they were inspired by the Arabellions³¹.

Outlook: *Shari’ah* Law

In a general development, of which *Reformasi* and *Bersih* were a public expression, levels of support for so-called *shari’ah* law are high in both Indonesia and Malaysia³². In Indonesia, PKS “recalibrated their strategy, pressing for the introduction of as many elements of Islamic legislation as possible at the regional level short of calling for the full implementation of *shari’ah* and the Islamic state”^{33 34}.

The majority UMNO party has backed Islamist moves to implement Islamic law in Malaysia³⁵. A large fringe of the population seems to be in support of such³⁶. A number of Islamists have maintained that the “introduction of shari[’ah] should be the ‘natural outcome’ of a gradual, bottom-up Islamization of Muslim society”, while a political theocracy, a so-called Islamic State, is to be created in the long run³⁷.

²⁹ idem, 121, 134

³⁰ idem, 134, 132 & 133

³¹ see idem, 127-128

³² see Rienner citing Kubicek, 2015, 23

³³ Brookings, 2015, 6-7

³⁴ The appeal for Islamic law has also been advanced by the secular Golkar party (ibid)

³⁵ idem, 8

³⁶ idem, 9

³⁷ idem, 9 & i

Conclusion

The Indonesian *Reformasi* preludes the Arab Spring and the Malaysian, Arab Spring-inspired *Bersih 2.0* was much more isolated than the *Arabellions*. In the Arab world, Islamist parties, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, won at the ballot boxes³⁸. In Indonesia, this did not happen, despite improvements in freedom of expression. Analysts have then alluded to the possibility that Arab countries could emulate Indonesia with “conservative Muslim parties play[ing more] active roles”³⁹. But Indonesia is unlikely to foster this potential development, as it lacks “its own vision for the Middle East” and is reluctant to “share its know-how ... in the process of democratic transformation”⁴⁰.

With regard to Malaysia, the country “balance[s] national unity against its multi-ethnic composition”, which is an interesting case in point⁴¹. But when one takes a closer look, there is still a disconnect between official Malaysian political speech and reality concerning its human rights record. Munir Abdul Majid, formerly Malaysian Airlines chairman, has said: “Sometimes Malaysia is good at sloganeering, but not execution”⁴².

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³⁸ Pepinski, 2012, 1

³⁹ Miller & Martini, 2013, 16

⁴⁰ Aras & Ekim, 2015, 7

⁴¹ idem, 2015b, 1

⁴² Gale, 2011, 1

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