

Indonesia is no role model for Egypt

Let's hope life after Mubarak does not resemble the post-Suharto era

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From Barack Obama to prolix purveyors of punditry in Australia and abroad, it has become fashionable in these heady revolutionary times to cast Indonesia as the democratic vision for a post-Mubarak Egypt — largely, it seems, because the two are mostly Islamic powers run by Washington-backed mafia dons who got knocked off by People Power.

Let's hope the poor Egyptians aim higher than their Muslim brothers in Jakarta. Thirteen years after the fall of Suharto, there are far more admirable governance models than Indonesia for the Arab world's most essential society to follow.

For starters, if Egypt were to become Indonesia, the Israel-Palestine peace process would be in serious strife. No matter how many times Jakarta's first democratically-elected president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presents Indonesia's warm and cuddly 'moderate' Islam to accepting globaloney forums like Davos, he still can't force a way through the thicket of Islamists in his cabinet to recognise the State of Israel.

And were Egyptian law enforcement to evolve as has democratic Indonesia's, the hated police force that was so rabid towards Tahrir Square's baying masses would become even more rancid and corrupt than it already is. If Egypt's embrace of democracy were to emulate Indonesia's 13 years of 'reformasi', Cairo's recently dissolved parliament would quickly degenerate into a dysfunctional cash-for-votes grabathon where MPs seldom show up.

And what of social equity and justice in this shiny new Egypt? Well, it had better look beyond Indonesia, where courts' judgments are for sale to the highest bidder, the bane of foreign investment. Yudhoyono might rail at the 'legal mafia' but seems impotent to do much about it.

Egypt's democrats yearned in Tahrir Square for robust, honest national institutions worthy of public trust and patronage. But if Egypt were to mirror Indonesia, its civil service would telescope into a single body: its anti-corruption authority, the most trusted institution in Indonesia after 13 years of 'reform'.

Egyptians hope that the democracy they've won will result in efficient, technocratic ministries advancing the national good. But Indonesia is no beacon here either. Its most capable minister, finance minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, was hounded from office after years of torment by

corruptors plotting in Jakarta's murky shadows, her president powerless — or was it unwilling? — to protect her.

What of the military? As Egypt's colonels try out their new offices, Cairene democrats might wish to note that Indonesia's army was also seen as the trusted protector of the nation, but played next to no role in its democratic transition, during which it was emasculated and shorn of its business interests — no bad thing, as it turned out.

As for Islam, well, if Indonesia's the example, Egypt has more church and nightclub bombings to look forward to, and a Sisyphean struggle to check extremism that's taught from primary age in far-flung schools and madrassas in desperate villages abandoned by the state. True, Indonesia, like Egypt, is constitutionally secular and religious minorities are allowed to peaceably exist. But — Copts take note — try telling that to Indonesia's Ahmadis, routinely beaten up and sometimes killed by vigilante mobs and militias, as compliant police look on.

Thirteen years on, Indonesia's 238 million people have genuinely grasped that there's real authority in their vote, if not yet fully embraced the maturity and insistence that with enfranchisement should also come capable institutions. They may come, advanced by a press that is probably Asia's freest, even if large tracts of it are controlled by old Suharto friends. But it helps the Egypt-as-Indonesia argument that Indonesia's G-20 economy is doing well, bounding along at 6 to 7 per cent annual growth and knocking on the door of fabled BRIC status with Brazil, Russia, India and China as the world's future economic engines, a place where energetic Egypt should also belong. Most Indonesians are better off than they were 13 years ago, and that's an eloquent statement for Egypt, where much of the anti-Mubarak anger was about the poor, the spark being the self-immolation of the economically disenfranchised in nearby Tunisia.

Indonesia's revolution in 1998 wasn't so much a revolution as a decapitation. Like Cairo last week, it was the angry voice of youth who revolted and eventually toppled Suharto. But unlike Cairo, his beheading seemed enough. Old Man Harto was gone, job done as his hapless deputy B.J. Habibie took over.

Few pushed in Jakarta for the type of systemic cleansing demanded in Cairo and, more loudly, in Tunis a fortnight earlier. In the 1998 vacuum, what followed

instead was Indonesia's political and business establishment — Suharto's notorious cronies — managing the implications of his ouster with minimal disruption to their corporate power networks. True, the economy collapsed and banks and businesses were seized by purpose-built institutions to gather and distribute the jewels in the economic debris. But it didn't take long for the cronies to pollute these agencies of change as they'd always done, throwing cash around, then re-inventing themselves as democrats with their debts and taxes forgiven or often just ignored.

After the brief and quixotic rule of Abdurrahman Wahid, Suharto's corruption pyramid flattened out during the term of Sukarno's shopaholic daughter, Megawati. The backhanders weren't as big but now there were more hands grasping at the loot as this absentee landlady devolved power from Jakarta to enthusiastic provincial fiefs.

(At this point, Egypt's democrats howling for Mubarak's arrest might wish to look away.)

Few Suharto cronies went to prison for their kleptocratic crimes. Unlike Marcos, Suharto never fled, returning to his comfortable home in Menteng. Nor did he see the inside of a court, let alone a jail cell, despite having looted — by conservative measure — around \$30 billion. In 2008, as he lay dying, the many who owed their careers and fortunes to his patronage flocked respectfully to his deathbed. Among them was SBY. When he eventually died, he got a state funeral and many tears. Yes, his son Tommy did a modest stretch for the murder of a rare honest judge who'd taken him on, but he was free in no time and is now back in charge of the businesses he ran — stole? — when Daddy ran the show. Billionaire cronies like James Riady, the notorious Clinton fundee whose 'major achievement was to export corruption to the US' as one lawyer had it, never left the scene. The other Suharto kids are still around, except they have at least felt it prudent to appoint placemen to front their empires. And positioning for a tilt at the presidency is Aburizal Bakrie, shadowy heir to Suharto's putrid Golkar edifice.

As they discover what's possible in the New Egypt, its democrats might wish to note that the era of SBY — whose greatest democratic achievement will likely be to serve out two full terms — may be as good as it gets for transformative reform.