



## **START OF TRANSCRIPT**

### **ISLAMIC POPULISM**

#### **Sen Lam**

Hello, I'm Sen Lam and welcome to *Ear to Asia* where we talk with researchers who focus on Asia and its diverse peoples and societies. *Ear to Asia* is a podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. Cast your mind back to 2011 and the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Those protests resulted in the demise of a secularist dictatorship and free elections for Egyptians for the first time in decades. That may seem like a political lifetime ago but notably, it meant that the world's first Islamist political organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, was swept into power on a wave of Islamic populism after having waited in the wings since its formation in 1928.

The rise of Islamist parties had many political analysts asking if the principles of Islam, upon which these parties claim to have been founded, are compatible with Western-style democracy, or would it be a case of one man, one vote for only one time? That's a quote attributed to veteran US diplomat Edward Djerejian in which a nation democratically consigns itself to an undemocratic future. Our guest in this episode of *Ear to Asia* is Vedi Hadiz, who is Professor of Asian Studies at Asia Institute.

[Unclear] words are denoted in square brackets and time stamps may be used to indicate their location within the audio. Distribution of this transcript requires client authority and is subject to the provisions of the Australian Privacy Principles.

Professor Hadiz has been researching Indonesian politics for more than 20 years and has written and edited more than a dozen books, along with numerous articles and monographs. In his 2016 book, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*, Vedi attempts to answer that question by analysing the political outcomes and ongoing evolution of Islamic populism in Indonesia, Egypt and Turkey. His book is published by Cambridge University Press. Vedi Hadiz, welcome to *Ear to Asia*.

**Vedi Hadiz**

Thank you very much.

**Sen Lam**

Vedi, we seem to be living in an age of renewed political populism. We saw it come to the fore in 2016. On the political right there was Donald Trump in the United States, UKIP and Brexit in the UK, and we also saw resurgent left with figures such as the American Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn of course is credited with inspiring a new generation of Labour members in the United Kingdom. Vedi, let's begin with the notion of populism. What is it?

**Vedi Hadiz**

Well, populism actually has a very long history. In the most basic terms, it is usually understood as a conception of politics where the masses, and the masses are usually understood as having morality and virtue and all things that are good about them, being arrayed against elites who are often portrayed as being rapacious, greedy, even culturally aloof. That sort of thing has been going on in modern politics for a very long time, but what I try to say is that we are in a new phase where it is clear that the populisms that you see arising in the world, whether in the advanced countries, or in the developing countries, have to do with the way that these societies are intersected with the processes of neoliberal globalisation.

Now, there are a lot of things that come out of those intersections; some of them would be considered good, like possibly economic growth, but they also produce such things as new kinds of social dislocations. The idea really is about growing distrust of the public in the institutions that govern power and the economy.

**Sen Lam**

Where does Islamic populism fit in?

### **Vedi Hadiz**

First of all, we have to understand Islamic populism as a variant of the populism that I mentioned before, and the defining characteristic of it is this, that the nation of the ummah, or the community of believers, becomes a substitute for the notion of the people that is the main feature of more conventional populisms. So the idea is that the ummah, which is the majority of the people, are the ones that have peripheralised, marginalised and exploited by elites, either domestic or in cahoots with international interests.

### **Sen Lam**

So the ummah would be Muslims per se?

### **Vedi Hadiz**

Muslims, yeah. So the idea is that they've been peripheralised and exploited since the age of Western colonialism.

### **Sen Lam**

And Vedi, of course, your book looks at three nations in particular, Indonesia and Turkey and Egypt. Let's start with Islamic populism in Indonesia, the nation with the world's largest Muslim population.

### **Vedi Hadiz**

Now, in Indonesia there is a long history of the idea that colonialism and also integration with the world economy has not benefited the majority as much as it has the minority. This has to do with resentments with the cronyism and corruption of the Suharto era, also resentments against actually Chinese capital, which goes all the way back to the genesis really of the older version of Islamic populism in Indonesia, which went together with an organisation called the Sarekat Islam, or Islamic Union, which was an organisation of small traders and manufacturers who felt encroached in the early 20th century by Chinese businessmen, supported by the Dutch, who were encroaching on their traditional business turfs. Now, today Islamic populism in Indonesia has a much broader social base. I think it's gotten into sections of the large urban educated middle class, which is the product of modernisation itself, and also sections of the urban poor, people who have gone on to the cities for a better life. Both of these kinds of people really had bought into the project of modernity, but they find that, in reality, their social conditions are very precarious, that they experience what I call the broken promises of modernity, and this is what appeals to them about Islamic populism. It is a way of articulating and making sense of their grievances.

**Sen Lam**

Even though these issues have resonated with the ummah, with the Islamic Muslim community, how have these Islamist populist parties fared at the ballot box? What do the recent election results tell us?

**Vedi Hadiz**

Well, that's interesting, because in Indonesia you have seen since around the 1980s a steady, what you might say, cultural Islamisation of society. You could see that in the women's garb, in the discourse in the public sphere and so on which has a lot more religious elements in it now than maybe 30 or 40 years ago. But unlike in some places in the Middle East, that has not translated into greater political power for Islamic political vehicles, and that is one of the puzzles I try to work out in this book in comparing it to the Middle East. In reality, Islamic political parties, depending how you define Islamic political parties, only really get about a quarter of the votes in Indonesia. If you count them a bit more loosely maybe about a third, but at no time have they been close to threatening to take over state power.

**Sen Lam**

Of course, we are speaking in the Indonesian context?

**Vedi Hadiz**

Yeah.

**Sen Lam**

So why haven't these parties succeeded at elections in Indonesia?

**Vedi Hadiz**

Well, this is because - and this is why I make the comparisons with the Middle East. My comparisons with the Middle East are mainly with Turkey where the AKP, [the] Justice and Development Party, has been in power since 2002, and with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Now, both of these organisations have been much more successful than their Indonesian counterparts. There are three trajectories that I talk about: one is the Turkish one where the AKP embodying a social alliance that articulates the ideals of Islamic populism, takes over the state electorally, they win the elections constantly.

The Muslim Brotherhood for decades were repressed but they dominated civil society through their charitable organisations and operations geared towards delivery of social services, so they dominated civil society. In Indonesia, Islamic populism has never

threatened to take over the state, nor has it ever dominated civil society to the extent of the Muslim Brotherhood. The reason for this is this: Islamic populism, for me, when it is successful, moulds or gels together a broad social alliance. This social alliance consists of different sections of society that actually have different interests. However, the notion that they are part of an ummah, peripheralised et cetera, suspends that difference between them.

So this heterogeneous ummah becomes notionally homogeneous and therefore partake in a social alliance that might have a political project. Now, in Egypt and Turkey, but especially in Turkey, this social alliance has encompassed the sections of the urban educated middle class, which has grown because of modernisation and so on; the urban poor, which has also grown like anything; but importantly also, sections of the bourgeoisie that are pious and self-identify with Islam, the Anatolian bourgeoisie.

In Egypt, to some extent, that happened. They've got the urban poor with them, they've got the educated middle class; in fact, the Muslim Brotherhood controlled the syndicates of medical doctors, engineers, lawyers and so on for years. They also had a budding bourgeoisie coming out of the networks of the Muslim Brotherhood. So you had the three elements. Indonesia, that third element, a big bourgeoisie as part of that social alliance underpinning Islamic populism is missing, because there is no big Islamic bourgeoisie in Indonesia, given the dominance of crony capitalism and of the ethnic Chinese big bourgeoisie.

### **Sen Lam**

In the Indonesian context, does there have to be some level of pragmatism in, for instance, accommodating modernity without being seen to compromise their Islamic doctrine?

### **Vedi Hadiz**

Oh, I think that happens everywhere. Indonesia is in no way unique about that. If you went to Egypt after the uprising that got rid of Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood people - who during the times of the ideologue Sayyid Qutb in the 1960s were again electoral politics, because it was western - in 2011, 2012, were very much for electoral politics. Why? Because they knew they would win.

### **Sen Lam**

How does that sit with the ummah, with the Muslim community?

### **Vedi Hadiz**

Look, the thing is this. Islamic texts were produced in the seventh century. Modernity has its own problems, so any Islamic thinker will have to interpret texts to meet the challenges of modern society. Now, that takes interpretation and agency. Now, every social agent has their own social interests; they can't be devoid of social interests. So in the case of Egypt during that time, you had religious leaders who were saying that well actually, we can bring Islam together with democracy. There was a need to do that. Why? Because they knew they would win. Why undertake an underground resistance, which means going to jail and being beaten up and whatever, when you can win elections and sit nicely in parliament.

### **Sen Lam**

Coming down to bread and butter issues for the people, what sort of relationship do you think these Islamist political parties have with capitalism and globalisation – I mean there's no escaping globalisation - in the three nations that you covered in your book, in Indonesia, in Egypt, in Turkey?

### **Vedi Hadiz**

Well, I think the key factor here is the power of the capital-owning element within that Islamic populist social alliance. In Turkey, the Anatolian bourgeoisie, which are provincial businessmen whose interest it is to displace the more established business conglomerates like Koç and Sabancı and so on, which is based in Istanbul and linked to the old Kernalist elites, they are very much for neoliberal globalisation. Why? Because that had meant really from the 1980s in Turkey a switch to a more export-oriented industrialisation or economic strategy, which they could take advantage of because they were exporters who had links not just in Central Asia and the Middle East and so on, which is the base of their business powers, but they were well positioned to get into the European markets.

In Egypt, the Islamic big bourgeoisie is smaller, but it had really big ambitions and it was articulating the same ideas when I talked to them. It wanted to follow that route that the AKP in Turkey did in alliance with its own section of big business. It wanted to go into market capitalism as a way of displacing the cronies that were around the Mubarak regime. In Indonesia, the embrace and enthusiasm for market capitalism is more muted, it's more ambiguous.

If you talk to the largest, more successful Islamic Party, the PKS, Justice and Prosperity Party, a lot of its leaders will be very pro-capitalist because they are

influenced by the model of Turkey and the success of that model. However, when you talk to Islamic business people, they are much less enthusiastic because they know they are not so big that they can compete successfully in a free market and would require protection from a state that would be controlled by a party of the pious.

**Sen Lam**

Have there been attempts in all three countries to reconcile globalisation and economic progress with the large sections of the ummah base, the Muslim communities who have been left behind by this?

**Vedi Hadiz**

And this is again why the business element is really important. In Turkey for example, you've had this neoliberalisation process which meant that the state moves back from a lot of delivery of social services and so on. So charitable groups and networks move in and provide these sorts of services. A lot of these are Islamic and within the AKP network. Now, how are they able to do that? Because they're funded by business, which is part of their alliance. So the middle class people run these organisations, charities and so on, the funding is directly or indirectly from the business alliances and through those activities they bind the urban poor with their political project.

**Sen Lam**

Looking at the general picture now, Vedi Hadiz, you mentioned in your book that the political success of Islamist populism is contingent upon the ability of actors and vehicles to unify a diverse ummah, the community, the flock if you like, and you contrast this view against the prevailing discourse on whether the guiding principles of Islam are inherently compatible with democracy. In summary, would you, can you elaborate on this thought?

**Vedi Hadiz**

I think that there is nothing about any religion in the world that is inherently compatible or incompatible with democracy. Democracy emerged out of social and historical processes that are very specific, in Europe. Then some of these took place, though in different forms, in other parts of the world, which make possible or enable democratising processes.

Now, what Islamist parties decide on, or Islamist organisations decide on is this: are we able to effectively compete in a democratic system? If they think that they can, they will be pro-democracy. That's what I mean by contingent. But if they know that they don't have the resources, that their opponents are much better endowed in terms of

networks and money and so on, then there will be a tendency to be critical of that and to say that well, the objective is to establish an Islamic state rather than a secular democratic one which can be used in the interests of the pious.

**Sen Lam**

Vedi, to sum up, can you tell us what drew you into this area of research, into Islamist populism in Indonesia and the Middle East?

**Vedi Hadiz**

Well, I always start a research project because I am dissatisfied with the existing literature. It's not to say that I don't find anything valuable of course in the existing literature; nobody starts from zero, after all. But I thought that most of the literature on Islamic politics in Indonesia were too focused on culture and theology and ideology. Lately, they became too obsessed with issues of security and terrorism as a means of framing the entire issue of Islamic politics.

I then looked at the literature on Islam in the Middle East and found a variant within the literature that focused on [the] political economy and political sociology dimensions of the issue. My work is mainly in political economy and political sociology, so what I did was I tried to apply the insights from the political economy and political sociology of Islamic politics in the literature on the Middle East to an analysis of Islamic politics in Indonesia, and I think that takes us away from analyses that are too based on well, are these people driven by a theology? Are these people driven by a maniacal need to kill other people and so on?

I think that one needs to understand those questions in relation to the broader social, economic and political context. I don't think that people's beliefs and people's actions just come out of the blue, but they are forged and shaped within the broader social context, and I think that the tools of political economy and historical sociology, political sociology, allows us to do that. I hope that if my book makes a contribution at all to the literature, it is to underline the importance of looking at the broader context within which Islamic movements are shaped and evolve.

**Sen Lam**

Vedi Hadiz, thank you very much.

**Vedi Hadiz**

Thank you very much for having me.

**Sen Lam**

Vedi Hadiz is Professor of Asian Studies, Asia Institute, the University of Melbourne. His book, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* is published by Cambridge University Press. *Ear to Asia* is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of *Ear to Asia* by following us on iTunes, Stitcher or SoundCloud. *Ear to Asia* is licensed under Creative Commons, copyright 2016 The University of Melbourne. I'm Sen Lam, thank you for your company and until the next time, selamat sejahtera.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**