

Upbeat band of moderates keep the faith

By TOM PLATE

BALI, Indonesia — A bad idea can sometimes illuminate the darkest landscape of truth with brilliant flair in a way that mere fact cannot. Consider, for example, the idea that Islam is incompatible with democracy. It's a really bad idea, but it can serve a very good purpose.

For starters, the proposition of Islamic incompatibility with democracy can motivate the most moderate and courteous Muslim to abandon his cool demeanor and mount a defense of his religion and culture with passion and conviction.

That's exactly what happened here when the incomparable and charismatic Anwar Ibrahim took the floor at "The Asian Century Begins," a three-day conference organized by the International Association of Political Consultants.

Anwar — a devout and learned Muslim — served as Malaysia's deputy prime minister from 1993-98 and a few years in the slammer as a Malaysian political prisoner. Pardoned after a change in national administration, this reformer, who now bodes to re-enter elective politics in his country, is virtually evangelical about the need for — and achievability of — harmonious East-West relations.

And his country, just like Indonesia, while largely Muslim, sports a government structure that is entirely secular. What was so striking and fascinating about this conference was the number of attending Muslim VIPs who were so adamant about and proud of their secular governments.

"The Islam-incompatibility question could very well be whether Christianity and democracy are really compatible," said Anwar, a thoughtful type who rarely thunders. "Or why not ask whether Judaism and democracy are compatible! Why do we only look for Islamicists as scapegoats?"

The way Anwar and many other Muslims see things, people who assume that Islam inevitably degrades into extremism are bigots and/or ignoramuses. They point to Turkey and to Indonesia as

prime examples of monster Muslim societies that are seriously secular polities. They point out that Islamicists in Southeast Asia have never had a quarrel with secularism. "And there is absolutely no serious debate in Indonesia over secular democracy," insists Anwar.

The Malaysian political superstar then surprised everyone by pointing to an otherwise discredited source as major inspiration for Indonesia's contemporary insistence on nonreligious government: "Give Suharto credit for making Muslims accept the need for a secular state. Even the young leaders of Indonesia believe in the value of the secular state."

Former President Suharto, now in increasingly failing health, ruled sprawling Indonesia, once a Dutch duchy, for 30-plus years (until 1998) with both an iron will and an apparently bottomless lust for wealth. The well-known Transparency International once rated him No. 1 among all the world's dictators for corruption.

But among businessmen, Suharto is regarded as the father of economic modernization, bringing new wealth to this former tropic of economic disaster. And among the country's countless moderate Muslims, Suharto is appreciated for keeping the country's crazies under wraps while letting sensible entrepreneurs do their thing and develop the economy.

"Suharto gave his country 30-plus years of nondebate about the importance of secularism," says Anwar.

But what about those Muslims — however small a minority, whether in Indonesia or elsewhere — who preach the poison of exclusion, turn themselves into human bombs, or fly civilian aircraft into very tall and prominent buildings?

"Some Muslims need to listen better," he says. "The true road for political Islam goes through [a place like] Jakarta. The threat to democracy is not from Islam, but we must avoid narrow interpretations of Shariah [Islamic law]."

Anwar also prays that secularism advocates won't make the mistake of packaging the religiously neutral governance philosophy as an antireligious movement: "A secular state can be religion-friendly and acceptable to Muslim populations. Building a pious society is necessary — even as the state remains religiously neutral."

Today Indonesia — the most populous Muslim state and in fact the fourth most populous country in the world — looks more and more

to be a pivotal, unfolding story that may well serve to illuminate the entire direction of this century. For if Anwar and his merry band of moderate Muslims are right, then the relationship between East and West could prove less a collision course than a trans-civilizational march of progress.

Alas, not enough Westerners appear to comprehend that the Islamic world is not Osama bin Laden's for the taking, unless the majority moderates lose their grip and people like Anwar are kept from power — or unless the West so continually and stubbornly paints Islam in fiery stereotypes that the propaganda paint job turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy and we wind up convincing them that they all need to pack a gun.

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