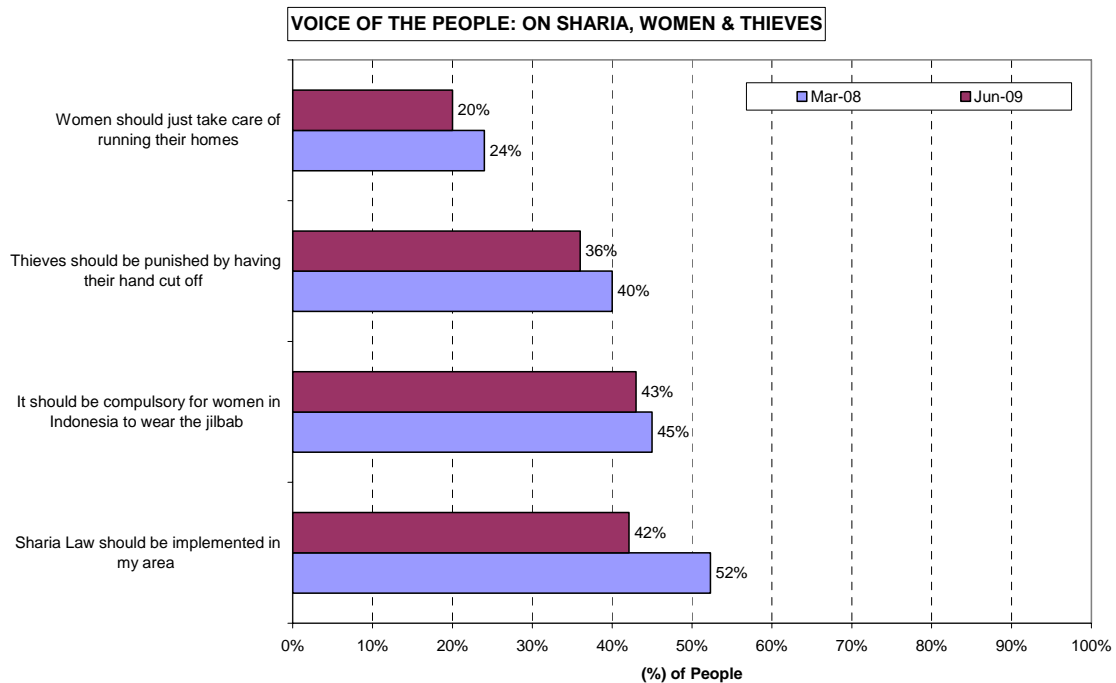


Is Indonesia moving from the bikini to the *burkhini*?

Just a few weeks ago, the Mega-Pro ticket proclaimed that the “cultural invasion” by the West must be stopped. The JK-Wiranto team took a cue from the growing number of jilbabs on the street to promote their wives in crowd-pleasing headgear. The election results are now official and all the signs indicate that the PKS party will soon be joining the new government. Is Islamisation a growing phenomenon that Indonesian business needs to pay attention to?

The obvious truth is that the bikini was never popular in Indonesia. It is unlikely that the *burkhini* ever will be, either. No wonder skin ‘whitening creams’ continue to grow as a category within the burgeoning cosmetics industry. What the scaremongers forget is Indonesia has always been a deeply religious country, with almost nine out of ten people agreeing that “religion has an important role to play in everyday life”. That number remains unchanged. In contrast, all the signs indicate that the world’s biggest Islamic population is becoming even more moderate, slowly but steadily. Here is the evidence.

In March of 2008, 52 per cent of all Indonesians and 55 per cent of all Muslims believed that “sharia law should be implemented in my area”. As at June 2009, those numbers are down to 42 and 43 per cent, respectively. In March 2008, 45 per cent agreed that “it should be compulsory for women in Indonesia to wear the jilbab”. 15 months later, that number is down to 43 per cent. There is a similar rate of decline in the views on corporal punishment. Then, 40 per cent believed that “thieves should have their hands cut off”, now that number is down to 36. Then, 24 per cent believed that “women should just take care of running their homes”, now it is just 20 per cent. What a difference a year can make. Will these positive trends silence the mudslingers?



These conclusions are based on Roy Morgan Single Source, a syndicated survey with over 25,000 Indonesians 14 years and older interviewed each year. Almost 90 per cent of the population is covered, from the cities, towns and villages around the country. The data is updated every 90 days.

In the twelve months gone by, the demonisation of Islam has continued unabated. Fox News Channel remains “the most powerful name in news” in the United States. Al Jazeera still isn’t an option on Foxtel cable network in Australia. What most critics fail to remember is that religion is a way of life to many, not just a personal choice. All the talk of separation of church and state is but a thin veneer when you connect these seemingly unimportant facts: George Bush’s cabinet meetings started with a prayer; John Howard nominated a man of the cloth as governor-general; Tony Blair quickly became a Catholic as soon as he relinquished office. Imagine the furore if President Yudhoyono were to name an imam as Vice-President. It would be akin to the horror expressed across the world when a tired and desperate people democratically elected Hamas to office.

We tend to forget that asking a practicing Muslim about sharia is like asking a Catholic about holy communion. Concurrence is compulsory. Written thousands of years ago, not modified for modern times, the tenets of yesteryear are followed to the letter by many ‘true believers’. Hundreds of years later, it would seem that the holy wars are still raging. The difference is that one side in tattered pyjamas openly wage jihad, the other in smart uniforms no longer mention the crusade. The sad reality is that both sides have become far more lethal than their medieval predecessors. We have all seen the footage of Al-Qaeda training camps, over and over again. But how many times have we seen videos of US military chaplains whipping up week-old cadets into an unholy frenzy? Not on CNN or BBC, we haven’t.

It is that kind of media bias, of political double standards, that create much of the tension that the rest of us live with every day. The global divide has widened in recent years, exacerbated by a handful of religious zealots on the fringes of society, both in the East and in the West. Their sympathisers, not their active supporters, appear to grow in numbers. The increasing presence of jilbabs in Indonesia is but one sign, of silent solidarity, of passive withdrawal, of seeking solace in spirituality. That by itself should not be confused with fundamentalism. Conservatism and Fundamentalism are not one and the same. On the other hand, there should be no doubt that conservative thinking, not liberal views, is strengthening its grip on Indonesian society. The evidence is unmistakable, even as Indonesia modernises, as consumerism grows, as the economy grows stronger.

The terrorists need to be rooted out, but much more intelligently than they have been. Pitting one faith against another, earning the ire of billions of peace-loving people won’t get anybody anywhere. But there is hope yet, for renewed efforts at bridging the yawning gap between the major faiths of the world. If you haven’t already, you may want to read Barack Obama’s Ramadhan message to the Muslim world. Politicians everywhere, take note. For business at large there is little to be concerned about on a societal level in Indonesia. Quite the contrary. And I don’t just mean the money to be made by just about every type of product and service this festive season.

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