

A legacy of democracy

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The outpouring of affection for Gus Dur is not surprising

INDONESIAN democracy is all the better for the contribution of Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia's first democratically elected president. Mr Wahid, 69, a frail but pugnacious figure popularly known as Gus Dur, died on Wednesday night. A moderate Islamic scholar, his most important legacy was paving the way for the democracy that Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, now enjoys.

A staunch opponent of the oppressive Suharto regime, Mr Wahid succeeded B.J. Habibie, who served as president for 12 months in 1998-99 after Suharto was forced out. Mr Wahid was elected president in a parliamentary vote in October 1999, defeating Megawati Sukarnoputri. Neither Mr Habibie nor Mr Wahid was prepared to compromise as they championed Indonesian reform and steered the nation towards full democracy.

At a time of grave fears for the stability of the Indonesian archipelago, Mr Wahid was committed to political reform and defending the rights of such minorities as Indonesia's Chinese and Christians. He cracked down on Islamic extremists after a series of Christmas-eve bombing attacks on churches in 2000 and walked a fine line seeking dialogue with ethnic separatists, avoiding a much-feared fragmentation of the nation. Mr Wahid also built bridges with East Timor, travelling to the island to apologise for past crimes and meeting Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta in Jakarta. He was also a consistent supporter of good relations with Australia, working with the Howard government to repair the bilateral relationship after the upheavals over East Timor.

Criticised for his erratic leadership style, he was sacked by the national assembly in 2001 over unproven corruption allegations.

Despite the sad end to his presidency, Mr Wahid's vital legacy of Indonesian democracy, realised in 2004 when Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected by the nation, is set to endure, making southeast Asia a more secure, prosperous region.

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