

Australia owes a debt of gratitude to Indonesia's accidental president

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AUSTRALIA lost one of its best friends in Southeast Asia with the passing of former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid on Wednesday. A controversial figure, particularly as president, Wahid was nevertheless loved and admired by tens of millions.

Most Australians who worked closely with Indonesia in the latter part of the Suharto period and the transitional years that followed Suharto's May 1998 resignation felt deep affection for Wahid. This was consolidated by his state visit to Australia in June 2001, in the last days of his presidency. Although by this time it seemed almost inevitable that he would be voted out of office by Indonesia's newly bellicose parliament, as indeed did happen a month later, his visit, the first by an Indonesian president since 1972, was widely regarded as a great success.

Like his presidency, the visit was big on symbolism and genuine sentiment rather than policy substance. It was hardly his first visit as he was a regular guest of Australian universities and other institutions where he had been admired for decades as a progressive Islamic intellectual and as one of Indonesia's leading dissidents. He had many close friends in Australia and genuinely liked Australians for their informal demeanor and their engagement with the region. He disliked pretension, appreciated good humour, particularly when it was self-deprecating, and admired frankness.

His state visit was largely organised informally by a small group of people close to him, including his second daughter, Yenny, who functioned as his chief of staff. At the time of his election, relations between Indonesia and Australia had gone through one of the most difficult periods following the referendum in East Timor.

Wahid himself, although one of Indonesia's leading advocates of human rights and critics of the Indonesian military, and widely regarded for his outspoken defence of Indonesia's minority communities, did not have a clear understanding of the extent of military-backed militia violence in East Timor at the time the referendum and the culpability of the Indonesian military leadership. He only came to a full understanding on this issue through the intervention of Yenny, who remained in Dili throughout the period of the referendum working as a journalist for the Fairfax press. As an Indonesian, she was one of the few journalists able to remain behind and from her vantage point staying at the military barracks witnessed the incredible violence that occurred. It was her reports to her father in the weeks after her return that persuaded him of the enormity of what happened. This led to him making a state visit to Dili on February 29, 2000, during which he stopped to lay a wreath at the Santa Cruz cemetery (site of the infamous massacre of 1991 that led to the US government severing its ties with the Indonesian military) and then on to the central town square, where he stood on a podium

alongside Xanana Gusmao to apologise to the people of East Timor for the sins of his people against them. Needless to say, this won him no favours with the Indonesian military, just as his sacking of army chief Wiranto on account of the referendum violence served to further consolidate opposition among the generals.

Wahid had been elected as a direct result of Habibie's forced withdrawal of candidature in the wake of the East Timor referendum and a concerted effort to block the ascension of Megawati Sukarnoputri. It was expected that he would be a weak president, and have to strike deals with both the generals and the political elite. His refusal to do deals set him up for confrontation with the powerful forces of the former regime. In this respect, the Wahid presidency resembled the Habibie presidency. Both men were non-politicians who became accidental presidents. And both men proved to be romantic idealists.

Wahid, like Habibie, is best understood as a transitional president. Judged as a regular president he was a failure but when understood in the context of his transitional role, he can be seen to have played a vital role in setting Indonesia on the course for reform. In May 1998, it was clear that Suharto had expected Habibie to join him in resigning. This would likely have led to someone like General Wiranto stepping in and ensuring a minimalist approach to reform. Similarly, it was Megawati who was expected to be Indonesia's first democratically elected president in October 1999 following July's parliamentary elections, the first free and fair elections in 44 years, in which her party secured a third of the popular vote. But when she did become president in July 2001, she went on to play a very passive role for the remaining three years of her term.

Unlike Wahid, who had increasingly taken an interventionist role in military reform, promoting reformist generals and confronting hardliners such as Wiranto, Megawati largely left the generals to their own devices and did very little else to advance reform. The result was that when Indonesians voted again in 2004, firstly for the members of parliament, and secondly, for the first time ever, in direct presidential elections, they deserted Megawati's party and the president herself and swung their support behind Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whom they identified as being more committed to reform.

Wahid had built upon some of the policy reforms of Habibie but his lasting contribution was not so much in the nuts and bolts of political reform, where he found himself stymied by the newly energised legislature, as in the raising of expectations. Under the transitional presidencies of Habibie and Wahid, Indonesians came to expect freedom of the press, transparency and accountability from both the president and the government, greater autonomy for provincial and district governments and the withdrawal of the military from political life.

They came to appreciate the way in which Wahid tried to use non-violent means to end the long-running separatist conflict in Aceh and the simmering unrest in Papua. Most could see that he was working earnestly to end the sectarian violence in Ambon that had cost the lives of thousands.

Indonesia's Chinese community, in particular, is in deep mourning for the man they felt did more than any other leader to address the wrongs against them and to rehabilitate them.

In the end, though, Wahid's presidential style was simply not presidential. As one of the leading voices to confront Suharto during the 1990s, he learned how to use unpredictable tactics to good advantage against the regime. He was an agile and clever streetfighter but this style served him poorly in office. The ancien regime was still very wealthy and incredibly powerful and actively used the media to

undermine the credibility of the president. A divided and rather naive civil society community gave him little support and made it easy to set public opinion against this unorthodox leader.

Many foreign diplomats found this frustrating. Some had deep respect for Wahid but felt he was wasting his opportunities. Others never really understood him and saw him as erratic. But many recognised that he was courageously taking on an impossible job and doing his best to achieve something before the inevitable occurred and he was removed from office.

From this perspective, the great strengths of both Habibie and Wahid as accidental presidents was precisely that they were not bound by conventional rational calculations about the limits of their scarce political capital. Had they behaved as professional politicians, they would have done much less and likely survived much longer, but it's also very likely that Indonesia's transition to democracy would not have succeeded as it has today.

Yudhoyono is widely respected, and for good reason, but the social base that has given him the legitimacy and authority that he enjoys was established by these transitional leaders. He perhaps more than anyone recognises the contribution Wahid made in establishing social foundations for democratic transition. As a former general himself and as co-ordinating minister for political and security affairs under Wahid, he well understands the courageous nature of Wahid's engagement with military hardliners and his boldness in pushing for reform.

It was in all of these things that Wahid was a great friend to Australia. It has been very much to Australia's interests that Indonesia has succeeded in its transition to democracy, though much remains to be done, and both nations owe a debt of gratitude to this accidental president.

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