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EDITORIAL

Fine example for the region

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One of the world's most admirable leaders died last week. It is lamentable that the name of Abdurrahman Wahid is less known than the villains and tyrants he fought and overcame. The former president of Indonesia was the major reason his country emerged from brutality and chaos to become the best example of democratic advances in Southeast Asia today. Known both affectionately and respectfully as Gus Dur, Wahid has left a legacy that will be difficult to live up to, but highly deserving of the effort.

Gus Dur _ a Muslim honorific combined with the nickname of his own first name _ was just 69 when he died after a long series of illnesses. The man of modest means suffered for decades from diabetes, and was functionally blind when he defeated the well-connected, fabulously rich Megawati Sukarnoputri in the first Indonesian presidential election in history, in 1999. His popular appeal was as simple as his campaign platform. Indonesia needed to get over the violence and systemic corruption of the Suharto years and move towards full democracy with a pluralistic government.

Many believed that the Indonesian army would never cede its power. Indeed, for several years after the overthrow of Suharto in "people power" demonstrations centred on Jakarta, it was assumed the army would simply retake control. Wahid, however, understood the concerns of the huge and widespread nation. The disgusting corruption and brutality of Suharto and supporters had been imposed at gunpoint. Wahid struck the correct chord in stressing religious freedom, accountable government and a goal of full democracy.

Wahid himself had seen and suffered the brutality of the Sukarno and then the Suharto dictatorships. But after the overthrow of Suharto, he refused to join the hotheaded calls for revenge. Instead, he counselled a policy to look to the future, and to build a democratic and tolerant country. This was a difficult role to play. On one side, the army constantly threatened violence to return to office. On the other, bigoted Muslim extremists, no longer checked or controlled by the government's threats, undertook major terrorist operations, in Jakarta and across the country.

History will probably record that Wahid's greatest achievement was to face down extremists on both sides, but particularly within the Muslim community. He insisted that the two great Muslim "schools" of Indonesia _ his own Nahdlatul Ulama, with 40 million members, and the 29 million-

member Muhammadiyah _ retain moderate and inclusive goals. He spoke out against extremism, including against the Jemaah Islamiyah group which, prior to the 9/11 attacks on the US and its Bali bombings, was attacking Christians and non-Islamic targets with murderous bombs across Indonesia.

Wahid's world travels, always with an entourage and often colourful, emphasised his belief that men and women, and their nations, should receive equal treatment. His frequent request to Indonesians and to world leaders was that "Upholding democracy is one of the principles of Islam". He made enemies among extremist groups with such talk. But largely as a result of his personality, the world's most populous Muslim country did, indeed, become a democracy and help to lead the worldwide battle against murderous extremists at the same time.

Wahid's presidency came to an abrupt end in 2001, and many blame a conspiracy of the elite. If so, they failed anyway. Indonesia today is Asean's strongest example of the advantages of democracy. It also is arguably the Islamic world's strongest proof that democracy is good for Islam in many ways. Wahid showed Muslims will fight the extremists, and that is his strongest legacy

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