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The voice in the wilderness

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The "voice" is gone. And we are left with wilderness.

Gus Dur, the voice that made the wilderness less terrifying, shall no longer be heard. His was the voice of hope, the voice that kept the flame of hope burning in many hearts. Alas, that voice is gone. And yet, on second thought, where can it go? The echo of each and every word he ever uttered shall remain here. Right here, with you and with me - with all of us.

Back in 1998, when I first met him, it was Christmas morning right in the holy month of Ramadan. Sitting beside him, talking to him and exchanging notes. I realized the man, said to be blind, was actually the only one in the entire country who could see things as they were. He was the only man with sight living among us, the blind.

I realized the man next to me was no ordinary man. He was a leader of an altogether different genre. He was a Sufi, a man of God. I remember his words on my tape: "Pak Anand, all conflicts are caused by self-interest . Triggered by mistrust . We need to know and appreciate each other, as you rightly say . Our youth must learn this important lesson."

Commenting on the role of religion and its relation to the state, he said, "The essence of all religions is *togetherness'. There are groups of people trying to change our state's Constitution . We must have a Constitution acceptable to all, and not to any particular group only.

"I work unceasingly to bring about harmony among the different religious groups . There are groups of people busy highlighting the differences among us. There are differences, but not too many. Why shouldn't we, instead, highlight the similarities among us?

"This is where you, your friends, we all must come and work together!" And that we did.

For more than a decade after that first meeting, we stood together. Rather, he stood together with us, with all of us, in our struggle to uphold the unity and integrity of our beloved country.

Whether it was the religious-triggered conflicts in Jakarta, or outside; the houses of worship attacked, burned and ransacked by the extremists; the so-called insensitive porn bill passed by our parliament ignorant of our indigenous culture and values; or any other struggle - the man stood by us.

Even frail and weak, he was always at the forefront of all our campaigns. He was, he is, the symbol of our struggle, the struggle of this nation toward a truly democratic state, where the concept of majority and minority no longer matters.

Not that we agreed on all issues. I did not see eye to eye on his political role. I considered him too big, a giant of a man, to occupy a relatively small presidential seat. I wrote and said to him, "Gus, you are a kingmaker. Presidents must come and meet you, seek your blessings *sowan in Javanese*. You are too big for the seat."

Gus Dur was silent.

Several months later, accompanying while he ate bakso (meatballs) in his room, I said, "Gus, you are needed outside the palace. The whole nation needs you." He was still silent.

Yet perhaps he was not silent. Perhaps I could not hear him. A couple of weeks later, he was outside the palace - once again among us, among his own people. The messiah of the people had returned to the people. We all celebrated the day.

I remember seeing him in Ciganjur some time back and we discussed world history. I quoted from Arnold Toynbee's A Study of World History. He was excited: "Do you have the book? Do you have it?"

He was like a little child.

I answered, "Yes, Gus, Pak." I always had difficulty calling him Gus - "big brother" in East Java dialect - and would often end up addressing him Pak Gus. A completely wrong expression that made him chuckle.

"Yes, Gus, but I don't have the complete edition, just the abridged edition."

"Oh, that's good, I must come to your place, and see it," he said, again quite innocently. Then he added, "Books must not be lent, they get lost." Once again he chuckled. His childlike innocence was divine!

For the next half an hour, we discussed nothing but books. I was reminded of my late father's meeting with first president, Bung Karno. He had a similar experience. D*j* vu!

Abdurrahman Wahid, meaning the "servant of the compassionate one", was a living commentary of both his name and his belief. He served God in man, he served in the fashion of prophets, messiahs, the Buddha and avatars. His religion was the religion of love, of peace, which embraced one and all.

Born on Sept. 7, 1940, he died on Dec. 30, 2009 - and yet, how can a man as big as him die? His voice and his legacy defy death. Gus Dur remains, his voice shall always be heard.

After Bung Karno, he was the truest man of conscience ever born in this country. He was a man who lived his belief. He was not afraid to voice truth as he saw and conceived it.

No, Gus Dur, don't you expect me to bid you farewell. No. You cannot farewell unless and until this country, this nation, your beloved Indonesia fares well. As I write these lines, I can feel your presence, I can hear you. Your childlike laughter remains with us, remains with the people of Indonesia.

I wrote earlier that yours was the voice in the wilderness. And yet perhaps I was wrong. For how can the wilderness remain a wilderness when your voice is heard?

Gus Dur, you remain!

The writer is a spiritual activist and author of more than 130 books.

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