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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Passing of a Reformer

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HONG KONG — By conventional measures he was the least successful president Indonesia has had, bundled out of office in 2001 after 21 months. But Abdurrahman Wahid, who died last week at 69, has left a deep and positive imprint on his country and a liberal legacy that is an example to Muslim nations the world over.

Better known by his nickname, Gus Dur, Mr. Wahid was always something of a maverick so it was a surprise even to Indonesians when this half-blind religious leader and Islamic scholar was chosen as president by Parliament following the first free elections after the fall of President Suharto. His period in office was cut short by a combination of his inability to adjust his mercurial nature to the demands of the presidency, and Suharto-era elites who opposed his liberal approach to the problems of East Timor and Aceh, and his attempts to reform the armed forces.

But Mr. Wahid was the single most important figure not merely in Indonesia's transition from Suharto's centralized autocracy to a decentralized democracy but in ensuring that the new democracy was committed to religious and ethnic pluralism.

He ended discrimination against the Chinese and was unbending in his defense of the rights of non-Muslims, providing leadership by example at a time when some members of the Suharto-era military were trying to stir up communal hatreds by funding extremist Muslim groups. He also played a key role in lancing the East Timor boil and paving the way for eventual peace in Aceh.

President Sukarno gave Indonesia independence and a national language. Suharto gave it centralized administration and economic growth. Mr. Wahid's legacy was the importance of accepting diversity as the basis of unity for the sprawling archipelago.

It may be shocking to many Muslims accustomed to hearing fatwahas from self-important clerics and state religious officials that the leader of the largest Muslim organization in the world's most populous predominantly Muslim nation believed in both democracy and the supremacy of private conscience over religious authority. Mr. Wahid's time at Al-Azhar University, Cairo's famous center of Islamic learning, had given him not just a deep knowledge of Islam but also insights into the dangers of rote learning and narrow-mindedness. His respect for liberal democracy was gained from living in the West, and from his early career as a journalist.

And he came from a Javanese Islamic tradition that was popular but un-dogmatic, incorporating some pre-Islamic elements. He rejoiced that Indonesia was a diverse nation with significant Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, even agnostic minorities, as well as huge variations in local social customs. He celebrated the fact that there were many different strands to Indonesian Islam, most of which were tolerant of the others and of non-Muslims. But he was also aware that this society was capable of nurturing pockets of extremism, such as those responsible for the Bali bombing. If today Indonesia has a cultural vivacity unique in Southeast Asia, it is partly a reflection of Mr. Wahid's plural attitudes and non-authoritarian instincts.

He provided intellectual backing for reconciling, at least to the satisfaction of the Nahdlatul Ulama, the nation's largest organization of Islamic clerics, Pancasila, the five principles of the Indonesian state, with Islamic jurisprudence. The Pancasila are vague but in practice emphasize the importance of the unity of the state and are a secular barrier against the imposition of laws based on one religion.

His status as leader of the Nahdlatul Ulama was inherited from his father and grandfather. But his popularity had much to do with his ability to communicate equally with the rural faithful and Jakarta elites, always informally, at ease cracking self-deprecating jokes or retailing gossip about the sexual proclivities of the Suharto clan.

Mr. Wahid was better as a catalytic agent than as a manager. His defiance of convention was his downfall. But his adherence to principles also left a positive legacy, a platform of pluralism and democracy his successors, notably President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, have inherited.

His later years were marred by physical infirmity that reduced his political effectiveness and prevented him from playing a significant role in international Islamic affairs.

Abdurrahman Wahid's passing reminds one of how badly the Islamic political world needs more people like him, and how badly many in the Arab and Iranian worlds need to learn from their more numerous Muslim brethren east of the Indus.

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