

Gentle, friendly face of Indonesia and Islam

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ABDURRAHMAN ad-DAKHIL WAHID

FORMER PRESIDENT

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WHEN the former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid succumbed to a long battle with kidney disease and diabetes, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono called for seven days of national mourning. For many millions of Indonesia's 240 million citizens, the mourning is very personal.

Wahid, better known as Gus Dur, although a controversial president, was deeply loved and admired. Even before becoming Indonesia's first democratically elected president in October 1999, he had built a towering reputation as a progressive Islamic intellectual and as a leading dissident. In fact, many feared that his unexpected entry into political office would tar his reputation as a social reformer and religious leader.

They were right to be afraid. He was never meant to be a president. It wasn't just that his style was too unconventional, it was that he refused to play by the rules of the game and to do the sort of deals that politicians need to do. Ironically, however, it was this commitment to idealistically championing reform despite a lack of political backing for which he is currently being remembered, as much as for his contributions as an Islamic intellectual and Muslim community leader. He was the wrong man for the job but it was the right man for the time.

Born into one of Indonesia's most prominent families of ulama, or Islamic scholars, Wahid went on to lead Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) for 15 years from 1984 until 1999. He succeeded in transforming the culture and orientation of this traditionalist Islamic association; with a membership of about 40 million people, it is the world's largest Islamic organisation. Along with like-minded colleagues he helped ensure that the NU pesantren, Islamic boarding schools known elsewhere as madrassa, completed a transition to becoming modern schools offering the secular state curriculum alongside religious instruction. This ensured that their mostly poor rural students were able to enter fully into modern Indonesia society.

Wahid's two grandfathers, Hasyim Asyari and Bisri Syansuri, had been instrumental in establishing NU in 1926, and his father, Wahid Hasyim, was minister of religious affairs under Sukarno and one of NU's most prominent leaders up until his death in 1952, when the car in which he was travelling with his son, the future president, skidded on a mountain road. As the eldest of six children, Wahid felt a heavy responsibility to follow in his father's footsteps. His solid pedigree gave him a commanding position to call for reform within NU and to challenge the Indonesian military, including president Suharto, on human rights abuses, corruption, nepotism and abuse of power. Gifted with a brilliant mind and near photographic recall, he blitzed through his pesantren studies as a teenager while sneaking off to the cinema as much as he could.

He also developed a love of literature. His mental gifts, if not his personal discipline, meant that when he arrived at Cairo's famous al-Azhar University to study Islamic studies in 1963 he quickly found the sort of traditional rote learning in place there to be a disappointment. Neglecting his formal studies he spent his time in informal learning, extending his earlier studies to include French cinema and Western literature (read in the library of the American University) as well as hours of coffee shop debates in the cafes of Cairo.

Wahid was working at the Indonesian embassy in Cairo at the time of the 1965 coup that saw Sukarno toppled and hundreds of thousands of alleged communist sympathisers brutally murdered. He translated diplomatic cables and letters reporting events from back home and was all too aware of the culpability of NU members in aiding and abetting the violence. This led to a lifelong commitment to speaking out on human rights abuses, including those linked to his own community. As president, he sought to rehabilitate former political prisoners.

Bored with al-Azhar, he moved to Baghdad University in 1966, where he completed a degree in Arabic literature. Back home to Indonesia in the early 1970s, he threw himself into NGO activism. Like his father, he enjoyed broad friendships across all communities and was an early proponent of interreligious dialogue. He was also a champion of the rights of minority communities, including Indonesia's Christians and Chinese, and later as president sought to advance their interests.

His leadership of NU positioned him to fearlessly critique Suharto and his regime, especially when beginning in the early 1990s Suharto sought the support of the radical Islamist elements that he previously persecuted.

To oppose this Wahid joined Djohan Effendi and others in establishing Forum Demokrasi to openly criticise the president's use of sectarian sentiment for political purposes. In 1994, Wahid and Djohan accepted an invitation from Shimon Peres to visit Israel; they participated in the inauguration of the Peres Centre for Peace. Later, as president, he sought to open formal relations between Indonesia and Israel. Despite this bold move his popularity among his support base in NU remained undiminished and he declared that he was now prepared to run for a third five-year term as executive chairman. Suharto did all that he could to block his re-election but Wahid's triumph established him as one of the few people who could take on Suharto and get away with it.

Nevertheless, he was forced to seek a rapprochement with Suharto following the latter's ousting of Megawati Sukarnoputri from the leadership of her own party in 1996 and the violent suppression of her supporters. But when the Asian economic crisis hit Indonesia in the 1997, he was again at the head of the movement for reform.

A near fatal stroke in January 1998 robbed him of what was left of his failing eyesight and meant that he spent the first half of 1998 in physical rehabilitation rather than in leading the push against Suharto. Still, following Suharto's resignation in May, Wahid was able to establish a new party designed to garner the support of members of NU but founded on principles of secularism. The success of this party, PKB, in the 1999 elections set him up for role in government. No one, however, really expected him to become president.

That occurred because Habibie, who wanted to turn his transitional presidency into a full term through election, was thwarted when he supported the referendum in East Timor and Islamist elements and others within parliament moved to block the ascension of Megawati Sukarnoputri. She eventually became president in July 2001 when parliament effectively voted Wahid out of office.

Wahid is remembered today largely for his role as a reformist president, but history is likely to also remember him as one of the 20th century's leading Islamic intellectuals and as someone who demonstrated how a traditional Islamic scholar can also be modern, democratic and humanitarian.

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