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## Franz Magnis-Suseno SJ: Fifty years of enjoying Indonesia

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JP/Emanuel Dapa Loka

Fifty years ago, an airliner landed at Kemayoran Airport, Jakarta. A young, tall and blond European fellow disembarked.

It was young Catholic priest, philosopher, and expert in political and Javanese ethics Franz Magnis-Suseno SJ's first visit to Indonesia.

Nowadays, the first of five siblings, born Franz Graf von Magnis and commonly called Romo Magnis, prides himself for having lived under the country's six presidents.

"I've witnessed various events in Indonesia. I settled here when president Sukarno was at the peak of his power and am still here today under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono," he said in his office at STF Driyarkara, a college of Philosophy in Jakarta, recently.

Magnis enjoyed his first taste of the country.

"I had a good impression of Java from the moment I landed. I knew soon enough I would feel at home in Indonesia. And no other experience has ever affected this attitude to date," he pointed out.

He first lived in Yogyakarta, where he learned Javanese for 13 months and Indonesian for five months. He frequently paid visits the city's subdistrict residents particularly to practice his Javanese, triggering their admiration for his perseverance.

He soon became fluent in Javanese — although he seldom speaks it today — and a famous authority on Javanese ethics, having written several books on the subject. Romo Kuntoro SJ, Cardinal Darmojuwono and Mgr. Leo Soekoto mentored him while studying Javanese language and culture.

In 1969, young Romo Magnis was already entrusted with establishing STF Driyarkara, which led him to meet many Indonesian scholars like Fuad Hasan, one of the first lecturers at the college.

In 1973 he met Cak Nur or Nurcholish Madjid.

"I asked Cak Nur to teach Islamology. We had a very close and critical relationship," revealed the man born in Eckersdorf, Silesia, Glatz, Germany.

"The most impressive man I met was Gus Dur. I met Abdurrahman Wahid [Gud Dur] in the 1970s as we frequently met at the Forum of Democracy. Gus Dur occasionally held outlandish ideas but every time we talked I felt more enriched. He broadened my perspective on humanity," noted the man naturalized as Indonesian in 1977.

Magnis acknowledged he had learned Islamism from Gus Dur and Cak Nur (both deceased).

"So my view of Islam has not been shaped by limited studies I carried out on my own but rather by my interactions with various circles including Gus Dur, Cak Nur and Pak Syafii Maarif," indicated the professor of philosophy at STF Driyarkara.

Over the course of many dialogues, Magnis' diverse opinions on a wide variety of subjects won the respect of his peers, despite not always being shared by them. Magnis was asked on several occasions to appear as an expert witness when the New Order regime tried students who were alleged to have embraced communism and opposed government policies, including members of the Democratic People's Party.

Magnis was amused when an alliance burned his books about Karl Marx in 2001.

"I found it funny they burned books that were actually very critical of Marx. It was the most ridiculous incident. They couldn't distinguish between leftists and people analyzing leftist ideas."

The alliance leaders once visited Magnis, who gave them the books with his autographs. He told them the books could be used to wrap rice, start a fire or for reading. They said they would read them. "I responded, thank God. But if you'd like to burn them, please do."

He added, "I'm a Jesuit, my motto is 'we've got to know how opponents think'. We consider communism our opponent and the most serious adversary of the Catholic Church. I'm against communism so I or we study it."

Romo Magnis loves to climb mountains, with more than 150 climbs so far under his belt. He has climbed Mt. Gede (West Java) 20 times and Mt. Merapi (Central Java) 12 times.

He recalled a funny incident that took place in the 1980s. It was pitch-dark when Magnis, climbing Mt. Gede alone, saw a light flashing, meaning somebody was there.

"As I got closer, someone called out, 'who're you? who?' I kept silent while approaching them as I was out of breath. One of the people there shouted hysterically and then fled. They must have mistaken me for a spirit or a forest ghost," he said with a hearty laugh.

As for Indonesia's six presidents, he said he had not met them all in person.

"I never met with Bung Karno [Sukarno], but I've learned a lot about him," he admitted. He talked most frequently with Gus Dur. He once met BJ Habibie before the former research minister rose to presidency. "I have a high regard for Pak Habibie," said Magnis of the third president.

In Magnis' view, BJ Habibie, although seen as a New Order figure, paved the way for democracy. He released political detainees in a week, revoked press censorship and allowed new political parties to be established. Habibie said he had to act quickly, otherwise resistance would be too powerful. He moved so fast the military had no way of halting his decisions.

Habibie's second merit, Magnis stated, was the opportunity he gave Timor Leste to gain freedom, which was a magnanimous gesture.

"The claim that we had the right to Timor Leste was one of the New Order regime's lies," explained Magnis.

Third, Habibie stepped down in style, meaning he set an example of how a chief executive should leave his or her office when the time arrived, without any complaints.

"This is what I appreciate most," stressed Magnis.

Fourth, as chairman of the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI), his policies were not against minority or Christian groups.

"He was a man of character, once in office under Pak Harto [second president] yet having no greed for power," added the author of 34 books and around 600 mostly dealing with philosophy, ethics and politics.

Regarding his unique experience as a Caucasian in Indonesia, he said some people would still ask, "How long have you been in Indonesia?" or "Can you speak Indonesian?"

"Usually someone around me who has known me for a while will laugh out loud before saying to curious people: 'This man has lived in Indonesia longer than I've been around,'" related Magnis, who will be 75 years old in May.

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