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The blind man with 20/20 vision: A tribute to Abdurrahman Wahid

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, New York | Mon, 01/11/2010 9:35 AM | Opinion

By the time I met him in the spring of 2007, his eyesight was failing, and his kidneys were not far behind. Yet, it took only a half hour, sitting with him and his family around their dining room table in Jakarta, to come under Gus Dur's spell.

Fluent in English, French, and Arabic, he regaled me with stories about interacting with world leaders – from Fidel Castro to Shimon Peres.

He had an infectious laugh but was dead serious when lashing out against religious and political extremism. I was moved to invoke the words of King David: "They have mouths but they speak not; they have eyes, but they see not; they have ears but they heed not"...(Psalms 135). Here was a man with 20/20 humanitarian vision.

"President Wahid", I said, " I have traveled the world looking for Muslim leaders willing to stand with us against those who justify suicide terrorism in the name of God, with little success.

"Now after Bali, and suicide bombers murdering innocents in Israel and Jordan, I come to you to ask that you convene with the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Holland Taylor's LibForAll Foundation, a conference of world religious leaders united against terror, here in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation in the world". He quickly agreed.

That was March. By June, we came together in Edenesque Bali, a place in Paradise that had been scarred by Islamist terrorists who murdered and maimed hundreds of Australians and locals.

There, we were Imams, Swamis, Priests, and Rabbis; along with Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish survivors of suicide bombings in Asia and Israel. And in a historic first: Sol Teichman – became the first Holocaust Survivor to address a public gathering anywhere in the Muslim world.

All this was made possible by this nearly blind politician/Muslim man of Faith.

In front of the world and local media and flanked by rabbi Daniel Landes from Jerusalem and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar from Bangalore, president Wahid opened the conference by throwing down the gauntlet to none other than "... [Iranian] President Ahmadinejad. He is my friend but when he lies about the Nazi Holocaust, I must speak out against him..."

A devout and scholarly Muslim, as President he showed the courage to lift restrictions on Chinese culture, promote Christian-Muslim dialogue, and even advocate normalizing relations with Israel.

In 2008, he gave his blessing for six Muslim leaders from his 40 million-member Nahdlatul Ulama group, to visit Israel as guests of our Center.

I was to personally witness his courage one more time. Last year, the Simon Wiesenthal Center bestowed our Medal of Valor on Abdurrahman Wahid at a ceremony in Beverly Hills.

Few people knew at the time, that after flying 18 hours from Jakarta, he spent 5 hours on a dialysis machine at Cedar Sinai Hospital before proceeding directly to the event.

His personal presence was his way, he told me of underscoring his personal friendship with the Jewish people and deep and abiding respect for the values of Judaism.

At the opening of our Bali Conference, Yenni Wahid, the President's daughter and an important Indonesian leader in her own right, said; "We were raised to believe that Religion is supposed to be the source of Blessing for all Mankind.

But let's be honest, in the world we live in today, most people see it more as a curse. Our challenge is to reverse this terrible trend".

As recent events above Detroit, at Fort Hood, and across the Middle East remind us, the scourge of religious-fueled terrorism and hate has not cooled.

With the passing of Abdurrahman Wahid we have lost a leader with crystal clear vision of Religion's true role in the lives of individuals and nations. Let the memory of this good man help us take back the day from extremism and hate.

The writer is associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/01/11/the%20blind-man-with-2020-vision%20a-tribute-abdurrahman-wahid.html>