Abdurrahman Wahid, democratic reformer and advocate of civil Islam, dies

By Michael Allen on December 30, 2009

Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who presided over the country’s early tumultuous years of democracy, has died at the age of 69.

Wahid, known by his nickname Gus Dur, was a democratic reformer and advocate of moderate Islam. As leader of the 40-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Islamic organization, Wahid promoted interfaith dialogue and defied radical critics to visit Israel in October 1994.

“He was against political Islam as a concept,” said Robin Bush, Indonesia country representative for the Asia Foundation. “He was one of the greatest thinkers and philosophers of Islam in Indonesia.”

A proponent of Civil Islam, he fought radical attempts to politicize the NU in the 1980s and 1990s at a time when Muslim groups were struggling to contain Saudi-funded Wahabbi elements advocating the implementation of Shariah law.

Wahid “was one of the biggest promoters of the [civil society] movement,” according to Sidney Jones, a Jakarta-based analyst for the International Crisis Group.

A co-founder of the LibforAll anti-extremism network, he explained the rationale for mainstream Muslims’ efforts to combat Islamist ideology in a Wall Street Journal article:

*Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the ‘right’ Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology. Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world. Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.*
A vocal critic of Suharto in the dictator’s final years in power, Wahid was installed as president following a backroom deal in October 1999, but struggled to assert his authority against “unelected powerbrokers, including a disgruntled military that resisted civilian control.”

He tried to establish a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate political killings and disappearances during Suharto’s 32-year rule, but he was consistently frustrated, not least by the still-powerful military.

Despite the lack of substantive achievements in office, if the initial tributes following his death are any indication, he will be remembered as “a truly fearless defender of Indonesia’s traditions of decency, tolerance, pluralism and constitutionalism.”