

Abdurrahman Wahid: contradictions of an unsuccessful democrat

Tuesday 23 February 2010, by [LANE Max](#) (Date first published: February 2010).

Contents

- [Offside with ruling class](#)
- [Fear of masses](#)
- [Consistent values](#)

Abdurrahman Wahid, the president of Indonesia between 1999 and 2001, died on December 30, aged 69. His death was met by a wave of commentary and discussion praising his contribution to Indonesian society, especially from the humanitarian and liberal democratic sectors: intellectuals, NGOs and human rights advocates. These sectors, with some justification, lamented his death as a loss for those struggling against discrimination and for a broadening of civil liberties generally.

Wahid, also affectionately known as “Gus Dur” (elder brother Dur), was at his peak of controversy during his presidency. He took a series of positions that put him at loggerheads with the majority of the Indonesian ruling class and its representatives in parliament. At that time, the president was not directly elected but was chosen by the parliament. The parliament that had elected him in 1999 turned against him by 2001, ousting him on highly dubious charges of corruption.

Offside with ruling class

If we list just a few of the positions he took while he was president, it is easy to see how he would get offside with a ruling class created during the 33 years of the Suharto-led military dictatorship. Wahid ordered police to halt violent dispersals of student demonstrations and appointed to a senior position the lone army commander who was an outspoken critic of military corruption.

Wahid called for the end of the ban on the spreading of Marxist-Leninist ideas, stating that democracy should be a free market of ideas. He called for reconciliation with the victims of the 1965 mass violent repression against the Indonesian left, including the Communist Party of Indonesia, issuing an apology to those victims on behalf of the country. He agreed to the raising of the West Papuan flag in West Papua as a symbol of the region’s identity and supported moves for greater autonomy. He agreed to a referendum in Aceh on self-determination (but was unable to carry it out, later backtracking). He also offered a public apology to the people of East Timor during a presidential visit to Dili, something the army never forgave him for.

He further alienated a majority in parliament by continuing his campaign for a more secular culture. This included calling for an end to the use of the Islam-based phrase “assalam mualaikum” as a daily greeting, to be replaced by the Indonesian equivalents of “good afternoon”, “good evening” etc, and opposing calls for a state based on Islamic law.

Not surprisingly, the political elite turned against him quickly, even though he remained within generally agreed parameters in economic policy. As the elite’s campaign to impeach Wahid

increased, so did pressure on him from pro-democratic groups to mobilise mass opinion against the old New Order-created elite. It was in this context that the contradiction that Wahid represented was most starkly revealed.

Fear of masses

Wahid was opposed to mass mobilisation as a means of conducting politics. I used to speak with Wahid regularly from 1991-96 during visits to Indonesia. The last time we spoke in depth was in July 1996, at his office in the headquarters of the Nahdatul Ulama religious organisation. He explained his opposition to mass action politics, which was growing in popularity during that period and which was to accelerate in the years to come. He said he feared that the masses would run amok.

In late 2000 and early 2001, pro-democracy activists were calling on him to support a united front against the old New Order forces, including what appeared to be comeback attempts by the army officers. These activists called on Wahid to disband the parliament and call new elections, along with mobilising support against Golkar and the army. It happened once in Surabaya in 2001, when 1 million people mobilised in an anti-Golkar campaign, but he hesitated until the very last minute and tried to resist the forces against him by manoeuvre rather than mass mobilisation. When he did issue a decree to disband the parliament, both the army and police declared they would side with the parliament, which then impeached him.

Wahid became famous, not only for his jokes and fondness for gossip, all at the expense of the elite (including sometimes himself), but for numerous zigzag manoeuvres, often confusing people and even tripping himself up. This habit, which preceded his presidency, was a direct consequence of a reality of Indonesian politics, not some quirk in his personality. He spoke out in favour of the most progressive and democratic of the values and ideas of liberal democracy.

Post-New-Order Indonesia, however, had produced a culturally philistine capitalist ruling class based on nepotism, corruption, cronyism and political repression, a bourgeoisie that had no interest in liberal-democratic ideas. The only social forces that did have an interest in struggling for them and might be convinced to do so were the poor masses of workers and peasants whom Wahid was so afraid to mobilise.

With no social forces as allies to defend him against a ruling class whose fundamental ideas, at least in politics, he challenged, Wahid was forced to rely on trickier and trickier manoeuvres within elite circles. In the 1997 elections, this even led him to act as virtual campaign manager for Suharto's daughter, Tutut, as he tried some kind of "change from within" manoeuvre.

Unable or unwilling to try seriously to mobilise mass support for his policies, he failed in implementing most of them. There was no referendum in Aceh; in fact military operations in Aceh intensified during his presidency. The Papuan flag stopped flying in West Papua. The ban on Marxism-Leninism was not lifted — and book bannings continue today. His appointments to the army and police were short-lived. There are more Islamic regulations in place now than ever before.

Consistent values

Despite the unpredictability of his ongoing manoeuvres, Wahid remained consistent in the political values he defended after he was dislodged from the presidency. He accepted an invitation to be keynote speaker at the press launch of the first Indonesian language translation of Karl Marx's *Capital*, published by the Hasta Mitra publishing house, run by a former political prisoner, Joesoef

Isak. He accepted a keynote speaker invitation when the newspaper of the left-wing People's Democratic Party was relaunched in 2002. He criticised acts of discrimination against religious minorities, often contradicting directly majority opinion among the Islamic religious elite. He publicly defended the rights of gay men, lesbians and transgender people.

While Wahid failed in turning any of the ideas he espoused into reality, his consistency in advocating liberal-democratic values was a definite contribution to the advance of the pro-democratic movement (just as his reluctance to call for popular mobilisations was a block to the same movement). Without the presence of Wahid and his consistent advocacy of those values, there would have been less political space and more obstacles in the way of the younger activists trying to find a progressive way forward. It is no accident that many youth won to more radical politics have come from a Nahdatul Ulama family background, as Wahid also encouraged a critical outlook among the youth of the organisation he headed for more than two decades.

The contradiction Wahid embodied represents a fundamental contradiction of Indonesian politics today. In a society of 230 million people, where an intellectually philistine bourgeoisie is the creation of a 33-year parasitic, nepotistic dictatorship and where the overwhelming majority are poverty-stricken and deprived of access to even a minimally dignified quality of life, it is impossible to be an effective liberal democrat without going beyond liberal democracy, to a participatory, democracy of the mobilised working people that opens the road to socialism.

By Max Lane

P.S.

* From Direct Action (Australia), Issue 19: February 2010.