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His Dream Came True

Now the spiritual leader needs divine guidance to help him rule

By NICO SCHULTE NORDHOLT

When Abdurrahman Wahid visited my home in Jakarta in 1982, he outlined his vision of a pluralistic, tolerant, democratic Indonesia. His main concern then was the emancipation of the Islamic Nahdlatul Ulama (N.U.), though he was aware that many of its members didn't share his vision. But he was also concerned about the bigotry that many Indonesian Christians displayed toward Muslims. Wahid hoped that I could introduce him to one of the most influential Christian leaders, T.B. Simatupang, then a senior writer with a national Christian daily. I was to convey the message that if the Christians dropped their arrogant attitude toward the Islamic majority, he could help improve Muslim perceptions of Christians. The fact that Wahid thought it necessary to enlist a foreign intermediary shows how deeply divided Indonesian society was at the time.



Ilham Soenharjo/Tempo

In the 1980s, Wahid survived Suharto's efforts to unseat him.

On that same day, I learned that Wahid had had a dream in which he was told that he had received the wahyu--divine blessing--to become Indonesia's future president. Seventeen years later the dream has become reality, but Indonesia is still divided, with Islamic political parties accusing Megawati Sukarnoputri's nationalist-secular PDI-P of being heavily dominated by Christians. These parties were strongly opposed to her candidacy for the presidency. Wahid is the only person who can bridge this mutual mistrust.

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Fortunately, Wahid is an exceptional spiritual leader. And that talent is exactly what Indonesia needs in its president. He has exhibited a rare gift for survival in his 15 years as chairman of the N.U., despite attempts by the regime of ex-President Suharto to unseat him. That skill traces partly to his mastery of Javanese intrigue. But it's also a reflection of his sense of perspective and humor. Wahid can disarm opponents with his wit. The last sentence of his short inauguration address on Oct. 20 reflects that

subtlety. "I will not speak too long now," he said, "otherwise I will be accountable for too many responsibilities." The statement enabled him to smoothly cover up his physical fragility, which prevents him from standing for long periods.

Despite Wahid's handicaps (he's also partly blind), he developed acrobatic capabilities during the Suharto era, enabling him to walk the tightrope between the liberal thinking of the former dictator's progressive opponents (which he shares) and his traditional, inward-looking power base, the N.U. This balancing act earned him criticism and at times endangered his credibility as a spiritual leader. But he has always been willing to do what it takes to achieve his vision of a pluralistic and tolerant nation. And skill in the art of compromise is surely a requirement in a nation now facing the threat of disintegration.

Suharto's more than 30-year reign practically ruined the country, economically and morally. From the start, Wahid must work to restore trust in the national leadership. His first steps have been encouraging. By managing Megawati's selection as Vice President, he defused the deep frustration her followers felt when she failed to gain the presidency. Wahid also arranged the appointments of two allies in his efforts to advance democracy: Amien Rais, the new head of the People's Consultative Assembly, and Akbar Tandjung, now chairman of the House of Representatives. Moreover, Wahid appears to have moved the military a step back in the Indonesian political arena.

My optimism is tempered by the danger that, with such fragile health, Wahid may not be able to stand "too long" to tackle the many obstacles in the way of his vision for the country. But one can draw comfort from the Javanese belief that a leader blessed with wahyu possesses supernatural powers-- which Wahid may need in order to sustain a full presidential term. Insy'Allah, God willing.

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