



ABDURRAHMAN WAHID, THE INDONESIAN REPUBLIC, AND DYNAMICS IN ISLAM

By Theodore Friend

Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, died on 30 December 2009 at the age of sixty-nine. The genial complexity of his character, which drew millions to him, was not adequate to the pressures of the presidency. But his life, career, and elements of caprice contain abundant clues for anyone who would understand modern Sufism, global Islam, and the Republic of Indonesia.

Premises of a Republic

Wahid was five years old in 1945 at the time of Indonesia's revolutionary founding as a multi-confessional republic. Sukarno, in shaping its birth, supplied the five principles of its ideology: nationalism, international humanity, consensus democracy, social justice, and monotheism. Hatta, his major partner, helped ensure freedom of worship not only for Muslims but for Catholics and Protestants, Hindus and Buddhists, with Confucians much later protected under Wahid as president. The only thing you could not be as an Indonesian citizen was an atheist. Especially during and after the killings of 1965-66, atheism suggested that one was a communist.

In this atmosphere, greatly more tolerant than intolerant, Wahid grew up, the son of the Minister of Religious Affairs under Sukarno, and grandson of a founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in 1926—a traditionalistic and largely peasant-oriented organization of Muslims, which now claims 40 million members. Wahid himself was elected NU's chairman, 1984-1999, before becoming, by parliamentary election, President of the Republic, 1999-2001. Against such a family and religious background Gus Dur had ample room to manifest some of the many contrarities that colored his track across time: provincial and cosmopolitan, saint and egocentrist, imam and politician.

His career may be understood in parallel and contrast with a leader often called his "twin"—Nurcholish Madjid ("Cak Nur"). They grew up in nearby *pesantrens*¹ near Jombang in East Java, where their fathers ran avant garde boarding schools in Islamic education, combining social science and English with religious and Arabic language subjects. Afforded a global outlook from the start, Cak Nur became a national leader of the Islamic Students Association, and made an early and lasting impact on public consciousness by declaring "Islam, yes; Islamic politics, no." With that principle he developed a large educated following and founded a major private Islamic university, Paramadina. By his role as a television commentator he enlarged his number of faithful and diverse adherents. At last, in perhaps the only major misjudgment of his career, he yielded to implorings of his devotees and ran for president in 2004. Those followers, however, had overestimated his traction in the public imagination, and Cak Nur conducted himself too far above the battle to win nomination: a seer but not a political leader. Madjid's chief political achievement before his death in 2005 was as a delegitimizing of dictatorship. Cak Nur was a major voice in persuading the authoritarian Suharto to step down after thirty-three years in arbitrary power.

Wahid, however, possessed salients of personality that equipped him for political struggle. He could charm a critic with a laugh, lasso a deviant with a quip, energize a circle with homespun philosophy, and inspire a crowd with a global vision. He had the courage to contend against Suharto's attempt to impose Sukarno's earlier five principles as the "sole basis" for Indonesian associations of any kind. And he had the wit not to get crushed while resisting a man who at the time controlled all police, intelligence, and military power.

After Gus Dur and Cak Nur in the 1980s defended Islamic integrities for their followings (largely peasant and middle class, respectively, but overlapping) against Suharto's secularization, they found in the 1990s they had to cope with a different

¹ Literally: place of the *santri*, or Muslim students. Other terms relevant to Wahid: *imam* means a Muslim qualified to lead group Qur'anic prayer. In Javanese context, *ulama* is used for religious scholar(s), rather than the Arabic singular, *alim*. *Kiai* signifies a distinguished *ulama* in the context of *pesantren* society; and *wali* suggests a "living saint"—an Islamic scholar or holy man with extraordinary spiritual powers.

Suharto. The autocrat saw that the global awakening of Islam was changing the networks of power in his own Indonesia. In 1991 he went on his first *haj* to Mecca, and thrust his support behind the new Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI). Hummingbirds intending to avoid Suharto's mist-net, Wahid and Madjid flew their own courses, high or low or wide enough to avoid entanglement and capture. They were thus free, after economic disaster and riot throttled Suharto's power in 1998, to help chart new ways for Islam and Indonesia.

Impulse Against Chaos: Wahid's Presidency

In the anarchic sequels to the deposing of Suharto, Wahid at first exercised his ingenuity and sense of timing brilliantly. In the free popular election of 1999, his party had only 13 percent of the popular vote vis-à-vis 33 percent for the party of Sukarno's daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri. But he adroitly deployed blocs in the subsequent parliamentary vote, and defeated her for the presidency, 373 to 313. Within two years, nevertheless, he was impeached by that parliament, and his vice-president, Megawati, was elected to succeed him by a vote of 592 to 0. What had happened in between?

Severely depressed economic conditions had not righted themselves. Nor had political tensions relaxed. Social inequities had not begun to be alleviated. Helping all of these things to happen was the president's job, but Wahid did not attend to it. He traveled to fifty countries in his first eighteen months in office. He paid international wizards to tell him what to do: Henry Kissinger, Lee Kuan Yew, Paul Volcker. Volcker told him that he could not give him any advice because there was no structure beneath the president to act on it. Wahid merely added levels and levels of economic advisory councils until they were likened to a triple-dip ice cream cone under hot sun.

In short, conditions did not sort themselves out to help President Wahid, and he showed no talent for prioritizing and managing them. His people were crying for vision, and he gave them transient epiphanies. His government was begging for direction, and he only gave it encouraging nudges, and even discouraging ones, as when he fired the wise and rewarded the passive.

An old Chinese saying runs, "Confucianist in office, Taoist out of office." That aphorism wisely suggests that different kinds of behavior are required by different conditions. A member of the bureaucracy must behave with rational concern for precedent, protocol, and policy; but in retirement he may behave like one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, drinking and composing poetry, or reciting it by moonlight. The aphorism obviously applied to the same man at different phases of his life, or to the same man at different moments, as was proven in Islamic culture by the Sufi Jalaluddin Rumi, 13th century Afghan-born Anatolian resident, who wrote in Persian. He was a prominent jurist simultaneously with being a sublime poet.

For Indonesian circumstances, the Chinese saying could be reconstructed as "Santri pursuing order in office, Sufi sage and mystic out of office." But Abdurrahman Wahid tried to eat his presidential cake and have it, too. He enjoyed a young Australian biographer referring to him in the Chinese way as a "drunken master." But his brief presidency was a failure of style far more than a triumph of originality. Did he face inflated expectations, undermotivated reformers, overzealous critics, subordination of the press, a constitutionally unrestrained legislature, a venal legal system, an unsupportive state apparatus, and an antagonized military? Yes, and more. But these conditions do not excuse his performance. Wahid failed to build coalitions and design policy solutions. Even when linkages crumble and initiatives fail, a president must be seen as zealously trying. Indonesia in 2004 elected Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as president, who faced all of the post-Suharto conditions that had bollixed Wahid and Megawati, but he coped steadily and occasionally prevailed—and was reelected resoundingly in 2009. In retrospect, Gus Dur's time in office not only left him humiliated as a "naked president," but revealed a nullity of coherent effort. No nation wants a goofy Sufi for its boss. But love of the man aids Indonesians in looking back on Gus Dur as helping democracy flower in their country.

Overall assessment must reckon with Wahid's health; or, more accurately, his diseases. By 1998 and his second stroke, his accumulated infirmities might be simplified as obesity in a small frame, very high blood pressure, and functional blindness. He had sight left only in one eye, and that one was highly compromised by diabetic retinopathy. Since he could not see beyond his dinner plate, how could he function as president? By a victory of will power, patience, and timing, he made it to the presidency. But should he even have attempted that, especially when his most honest counselors on health were advising against it? There is no category of wisdom that includes pursuit of a responsibility which one is incapable of meeting.

Gus Dur was lucky in the women of his family. His wife Nuriyah was an Islamic scholar in her own right. They had three daughters. When she was made a quadriplegic by a terrible auto accident, their second daughter, Zannuba, "Yeni," became Wahid's seeing eye, right hand, and social navigator. But not even Yeni's high intelligence, gentle charm, and excellent political instincts, combined with a protective and supportive personal staff, could make her father equal to the demands of being the chief executive of Indonesia. Its Muslim population was only exceeded by all Arab countries combined, and it bristled with problems proportionate to its size.

In 2001, impeachment ended Gus Dur's presidency in an inglorious way. He did not go gently into oblivion, but refused to evacuate the palace for four days. At night he went out on a balcony in shorts to address assembled diehard followers.

Megawati, his obstinate, formal, and uninspired successor, did no better in setting an example of transfer of power in 2004. She never conceded that election to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who won over 60 percent of the popular tally, actually pulling more votes – 69 million -- than George W. Bush in the same electoral year, or indeed Barack Obama in 2008. Megawati only pouted, and finally departed. Yudhoyono won a second term readily in 2009, and can be expected to give up office gracefully in 2014, after significant achievements.

Part of democracy is imposing and recognizing limits. Another part is not being a sore loser. A further part, which Indonesia has a ways yet to achieve, is to develop a loyal opposition: one with the capacity to criticize those in power, but to act concertedly for the greater national good when necessary. By 2019? Perhaps. Cak Nur said to me in 1999 that after five free and fair elections, Indonesia could be considered a stable democracy. 2019 would be the fifth such election.

Elements of Style and Values (Don't Forget Love)

Reaching back to reassess the meaning of Abdurrahman Wahid for Islam and Indonesia, it is important to recall that his favorite novel (fiction and cinema, in his sighted days, were two of his great appetites) was by Chaim Potok, the rabbi from Philadelphia. *My Name is Asher Lev* is the story of a young Jew striving to reconcile his Orthodox background with his artistic talent, and with the demands of the larger culture in which he lives. Wahid recognized similar tensions in his own youth, even though his family's *pesantren* offered an education that went far beyond the rote learning of the Qur'an. He was encouraged to conceive and contemplate a wider world, and did so, with eight years in Cairo, Baghdad, and Europe. Less assiduous than Madjid in book-learning, he never brought back an advanced degree, but learned to swim in diverse and turbulent currents of culture.

To reconcile tradition and contemporaneity while anticipating the future: that is the task of political leaders, and religious leaders as well. Gus Dur applied himself with verve to these needs in both dimensions, never deterred by appearing heterodox, often finding expression for ways forward that others felt were perilously eccentric. Courage, nonetheless, was a component of Wahid's outlook and bearing, and he showed it in lonely defense of Salman Rushdie. And by traveling to Jerusalem in 1997 to accept an award named for Yitzhak Rabin. While critical of Israel's policies toward Palestine, Wahid never fell into the automatic inflated righteousness of many Muslim leaders who curried popular support by demonizing the Jewish people. He was true to "Asher Lev," so to speak—an imaginative grounding that continued as a point of orientation.

One of the characteristic marks of Nahdlatul Ulama, especially in contrast to Muhammadiyah, its largest rival Muslim organization, has always been its ease of acceptance of local culture, and its preference for syncretism over textualism. Gus Dur lived out this preference with drama and gusto, but sometimes it got him into trouble. During the 1999 election campaign he traveled to South Central Java, where the cult of Nyai Loro Kidul is prominent—the Queen of the Southern Sea. He allowed himself to be photographed being doused with ocean water. The newspaper image of him with seaweed on his forehead was ludicrous in itself, but a far better satirist than Megawati was required to take advantage of this un-Qur'anic behavior.

A key for many modern Indonesians is to strengthen the tissues of what has become known in the last twenty years as "civil society." The elements of such a nervous system were there by the middle and late Suharto periods, but with extremely little musculature in relation to the size of the society at large. That has remained true even into the 21st century. But Gus Dur's activities in the last eight years of his life made him a natural icon of civil society, as it developed stronger fascia. His generosity to the Trialogue movement (Muslim-Christian-Jewish dialogue) while in office was extraordinary—he hosted it in Jakarta to the extent of engaging eight of his cabinet officers with himself in its activities, while summoning many leading businesspeople in addition. What may have been indefensible as a digression from administrative duties was nonetheless a classic exercise in strengthening the expression of a modern civil society.

If one asks about the radius of the personal example of Gus Dur, the answers will be variegated. He once invited me to dinner with Mohamar Qaddafi, but the Libyan autocrat in the end did not make the trip to Jakarta. He was adjusting his course for reasons of realpolitik anyway, and not because of Wahid's influence. The last writings of Benazir Bhutto, completed before her assassination in Pakistan two years ago, showed remarkable frequency of quotation from Gus Dur and Cak Nur, beyond other contemporary Muslim writers. And, at an expressly Sufi level, the eminent philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Iranian by birth, voices admiration for Wahid and gratitude for his translating an early book by Nasr into Indonesian – even though he did so without the author's knowledge.

These examples show a range of influence, from Sufism per se, to liberal interpretation of the Qur'an, to cosmopolitan accommodations in power relations—all of which were characteristic of Abdurrahman Wahid. None, however, reflect his behavior as a *wali*, a "living saint" or free-spirited guru. Gus Dur took many liberties with norms of behavior and expression in largely Javanese/Indonesian circumstances, because he knew in those settings what could be enchanting and what might be repellent. Even there his behavior may have been accentuated by resistance to the repressive boredom in thirty-three years of rule by Suharto. Indeed, one discerning expert suggests that the proliferation of *wali*, some of them "weird," in the final decade of the "New Order," might have been encouraged by Gus Dur, overtly or by example. Some of these *wali* were

flamboyantly charismatic and anti-conventional, or even counter-Islamic in behavior. But “weirdness” is not translatable. Wahid epigoni and imitators in this regard have no international following, and even his personal example as *wali* has no trans-cultural magnetism.

The fact remains that Abdurrahman Wahid was a major pan-Islamic figure and a global personality, whose career contributes to the recent efflorescence of Sufism on many planes in many places, and its resulting strength in the worldwide spiritual marketplace. His influence will persist through the Wahid Institute, which was founded in 2004 upon Yeni’s return from postgraduate work at Harvard. The Institute continues its work in “seeding a peaceful and pluralistic Islam,” not to mention gender-sensitive varieties of the faith. One of Gus Dur’s last acts was to officiate at the marriage, in October 2009, of Yeni with a young member of the Nahdlatul Ulama who is an elected member of parliament.

The Wahid Institute prides itself, among other virtues, in research upon (and resistance to) literalism, extremism, and violent tendencies in Indonesia’s Islam. Alarmist observers are apt to say that there is plenty to comment on, to expose, and to resist: for “Arabisme,” an Indonesian term of obloquy for the hyper-orthodoxy exported by Saudi Arabia, has been gaining some ground. Against that influence, even though Cak Nur and Gus Dur have died, there remain in Indonesia strong young advocates of open Islam.

Perhaps the world’s foremost female Muslim theologian, Siti Musdah Mulia, has a glowing prominence in young and moderate minds as she contends for *ijtihad* or independent interpretation of the Qur’an, as against stagnation. A founder-leader of the Liberal Islamic Network, Ulil Abshar Abdalla is proceeding toward a doctorate at Harvard to give still more range and weight for views that he declares were inspired in him by Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid. And Yeni Wahid herself carries on her father’s tradition in values with consummate grace and energy.

Musdah in her 50s, Ulil in his 40s, and Yeni in her 30s are testimony that Abdurrahman Wahid is not dead. His inquisitive, assimilative, hospitable attitudes, and his loving and good-humored nature live in persons of the highest integrity and intelligence; and radiate among nations in the spirit of Gus Dur.

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