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Putting Suharto, his era in perspective

A. Kadir Jasin

BEFORE we hurry to jump on the bandwagon and condemn the just resigned Indonesian President Suharto, let us pause for a moment and put the man, his time and the events that led to his resignation four days ago in perspective.

The fact that he had decided to hasten his resignation, thereby reducing the likelihood of further bloodshed, showed that the man was not as dictatorial and power-crazy as the Western-controlled international media had portrayed him to be.

These were the same media organisations which only a few years ago painted him as a better and wiser Asian leader than others because he was not outspoken and, in their judgment, was more supportive of the United States.

This was certainly the case when Indonesia hosted the meeting of leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in 1994. The US and its allies needed Suharto to silence Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for the setting up of the East Asia Economic Caucus.

He was also the man America and the West supported to the hilt during the Cold War years because he was deeply anti-communist and his huge nation was seen as a bulwark against the spread of communism.

Suharto was, to the West, the man of the hour when he saved Indonesia from chaos and anarchy in the aftermath of the failed communist-led coup of Sept 30, 1965 and eventually sidelined the anti-West Sukarno.

He not only restored law and order, which some say at too high a human cost, but went on to give Indonesians what they had not enjoyed for hundreds of years - enough food to eat.

In less than two decades after leading what was to be known as the "Orde Baru" (New Order) Government, Suharto put enough food on the table of starving Indonesian families by achieving self-sufficiency in rice.

It is this aspect of his policy that is likely to be remembered by the Indonesian people. With enough food for his countrymen to eat, Suharto went on to promote resettlement of the people away from the over-crowded island of Java and introduced industrialisation to provide jobs for the booming population.

When he took over the reins, Indonesia was one of the poorest nations in the world with per capita GDP of US\$70 - lower than that of India.

Before the attack on regional currencies last year, its per capita GDP on the purchasing power parity basis stood at US\$4,140 against India's US\$1,500. In 1965, Indonesia had just over 100 million people, but today it has more than 200 million.