

20 MAR 1999

Habibie-Crisis (News Focus)

HABIBIE, PHONE-BUGGING AND THE INDONESIAN FREE PRESS

By: Openg Onn Net

JAKARTA, March 20 (Bernama) -- More than 30 years after his death, Indonesians still revered their first president, Sukarno, and regarded him as the best son the republic ever produced.

Other high-profile leaders in the region could never match him and could only be considered as "Little Sukarno".

The only figure regarded with the same esteem by the Indonesian press so far is Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

If Indonesians care to look inward, they should be able to find a "Little Sukarno" in their midst -- the 63-year-old president, B.J. Habibie. They may not be equals but they have something in common and something in contrast.

Like Sukarno, Habibie too has the oratory flair and adroitness of delivering marathon speeches. Both graduated from the same institution of higher learning, the Institute Technology Bandung.

While Sukarno graduated as an engineer but was later more committed in building Indonesian political consciousness towards independence, Habibie further his studies in Germany in aeroplane construction and later became one of the world's leading aeronautics scientist.

Although Sukarno could charm the crowd with his rhetoric to an electrifying degree, it may not necessarily be so for the small-built Habibie.

Like Sukarno, Habibie has the habit of straying away from his prepared text of speeches in many of his official functions and talking for hours on end, especially if it is his pet subject.

Some describe this as one of his antics but many attributed it to Habibie's intellectual gift.

"I want to be what I am and I don't want to be like a robot," he quipped once at a presidential palace function when declining to read a text of speech prepared for him by his aides.

Like Sukarno, Habibie is also beset with subjects of controversy, crisis and polemic although their nature many not be the same.

When he was called to deliver a keynote address at the Asian-German Editors Conference here recently, he could read his entire text written in English in just less than half an hour.

As it was, he took it back to his seat about two hours later, after verging on accounts of his university and his working days in Germany where he spent more than 20 years. Speaking in English, he once in a while spiced his narration and anecdotes in fluent German.

He then touched on his appointment as the republic's third president following a sudden shift in the Indonesian history that saw Suharto making a sad exit amidst mass demonstrations demanding for his resignation in May last year after 32 years in power.

He said that the episode caught him literally unprepared and through his chronicle of the event illustrated that his ascension to the seat did not come with a silver spoon.

He gave his account of a drama that unfolded on the night of May 22, one day after he was sworn in as president, which suggest that there was an attempt to unseat him through a coup d'etat led by the then Indonesian Armed Forces Commando Special Squad's chief, Lt Jen Probowo Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law.

"There was a concentration of armed forces personnel from the squad

around my house led by someone whose name is not a secret anymore -- Probowo," he said.

While the account did not ring a bell to the German editors, the local journalists present seemed to have hit something they had been waiting for all this while and hurried to contact their editors to alert them of the story.

The following day, details of the drama filled the front page of almost all the local newspapers as lead story, breaking the mystery over the large concentration of army personnel around Habibie's residence that night.

The story sparked an uproar of controversy with some even asking why Habibie chose to tell the story now when he should concentrate on rebuilding the tortured Indonesian economy.

The story met with immediate response from Probowo who has been spending his time in Jordan since last year after he was forced to retire.

Through a letter read by his close associates at a news conference here a few days later, he said that the concentration of the Kopassus personnel was carried out as an operational necessity to safeguard strategic national assets and not for any other motive.

Hardly before the controversy faded away, a local weekly magazine came out with a transcript of an alleged telephone conversation between Habibie and Attorney-General Andi M. Ghalib.

In the so-called conversation, Habibie had told Ghalib to go easy on Suharto, in the course of an investigation relating to the deposed president's alleged questionable involvement in several charity foundations.

By making such suggestions, Habibie has gone against the mandate given to him by the People's Consultative Assembly which issued a directive last year for the government to investigate Suharto for all his alleged wrongdoings while still in power.

While Ghalib said he could not recall having had such a conversation, Habibie on the other hand ordered Minister of Defence, General Wiranto to investigate the phone-bugging.

This directive appeared to give credence to the fact that the telephone conversation did take place.

The Indonesians' sudden taste of press freedom which Habibie himself had succoured had a field day thriving on the issue which was described as the "Monasgate Scandal".

Monas, sited on the heart of Jakarta, stands for Monumen Nasional, or the National Monument which is the symbol of the Indonesians' resolve and determination in their struggle for independence from colonialism.

Many analysts and journalists like to equate the so-called incident to the 1972 Watergate Scandal that brought down United States' President Richard Nixon.

In both the events, the press had been the key-player in bringing to the fore the drama that took place in the corridor of power with the tape recording of telephone conversations as its material.

The controversy did not revolve just around the authenticity of the transcript but many also asked who could have conducted the phone-tapping and the legality of such an act.

The telephone bugging, if it true, certainly punched a big hole in the national security system. A conversation between the president and his subordinates on official matters is a state secret.

On the question of law, it is not only wrong for the public to have access to classified matter but it is also an offence to publish and disseminate it.

This also raised the question not only of the newly-found unlimited press freedom in Indonesia through Habibie's reform-style government but

also a test for the journalists on how much they respect their code of ethics.

Many analysts argued that the press exposure of the telephone transcript did not run counter to the code of ethics if the matter they published was of national interest.

While the debate continues in the press about the issue, Habibie, the ruling Golkar Party top contender for the November electoral college presidential seat, is left wondering what he had done wrong.

-- BERNAMA

OPP RM