

Dr M: Suharto did wrongs, but no leader is perfect
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Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he respects ousted Indonesian president Suharto for having united Indonesia and changing its image in the world's eye.

Admitting to be friends with Suharto, he said while the Indonesian president did commit wrongs, no leader is perfect.

"I respect Suharto because he changed Indonesia from being a troubled country under Sukarno rule, and he did so while maintaining unity among the many different ethnicities from the 13,000 islands.

"Indonesia is not an easy country to rule, but he kept it intact. After he took over, Indonesia did not split up – there was some trouble in Aceh, but in general he changed Indonesia's image to be a more developed one.

"Yes, there were things he did which were wrong, but the same can be said of any leader," he said in an interview with *CNN Indonesia* .

Mahathir said he had frequently met with Suharto during his two-decade premiership.

"We discussed matters as friends," he said.

Mahathir had in an earlier interview shed tears, recalling Suharto as his "brother". Suharto died in 2008.

Suharto resigned in 1998 after 31 years in office, after tens of thousands of university students took to the street demanding his resignation amid political and economic crises.

His rule is often described through his Orde Baru ideology, which saw consolidation of power, clampdown on civil society, alleged political rigging and military coercion.

The 1998 'reformasi' uprising in Indonesia was mirrored on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, when Mahathir sacked Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister amid the Asian financial crisis.

Anwar supporters also adopted the 'reformasi' slogan for its movement.

Mahathir's administration came down hard on protesters, detaining dozens under the Internal Security Act.

Some of those detained went on to become parliamentarians and key office-bearers in Anwar's PKR and various political parties.

They include now Umno vice-president and Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who returned to Umno's fold after he was released from ISA.

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