

Gus Dur visits Anwar for 61st birthday
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Friendships can develop from several roots: when they serve mutual needs, when dependencies overlap and when shared experiences are intense.
MCPX

But there is another type that can develop between intelligent people who are otherwise strangers to each other: when they share a common store of knowledge, a community of information, with a known set of rules and attached meanings.

Deeper, yet, is the friendship that does not require the respondents see each other often for they don't feel that the interstices entail a loss. Suffice they hear or read something the other says, and straight away an immediacy of presence is felt, palpable through the realm of spiritual mediation.

anwar ibrahim and gus dur former indonesia president 110808 02Such is the friendship between former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid and PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim. 'Gus Dur', as the titular head of the powerful Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is popularly called, flew into Kuala Lumpur on Sunday to be with Anwar for the latter's 61st birthday.

Both aspirants for the political leadership of their countries - Gus Dur for the second time come the 2009 Indonesian presidential contest - have known each other for 15 years, but it was only in the two years (1999-2001) that Gus Dur was the fourth Indonesian president the tie became really close.

Gus Dur had interposed with then Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed no less than three times, in person and through letters, to obtain Anwar's release from prison on humanitarian grounds. Anwar was jailed between 1998 and 2004, initially under the draconian Internal Security Act and, following conviction for corruption and sodomy, under the penal code. He was exonerated on appeal from the sodomy charge.

"I didn't believe those charges when they were leveled against him the first time," said Gus Dur in an interview with Malaysiakini at a friend's house in Kelana Jaya before leaving for Anwar's residence.

anwar ibrahim and gus dur former indonesia president 110808 04Anwar hastened from a hectic round of campaigning in Permatang Pauh to host, with wife Azizah, the elder statesman to a small celebration in Bukit Segambut.

Gus Dur, who is 68 and almost blind from diabetes and other ailments, sees Anwar's progress to the summit of Malaysian political leadership as inexorable - even necessary - for instantiating the idea that Islam and democracy are compatible.

A week ago he signed a letter with retired United States Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor affirming Anwar's role in the democratic movement in Malaysia.

"I had no hesitation in signing the letter for I believe in Anwar's innocence and importance to the needs of current history," he explained.

Minorities will be protected

Gus Dur, who intends to run as the National Awakening Party's (PKB) candidate for president in the Indonesian elections in 2009, views the present era in world politics as the time to demonstrate that Islam and democracy can co-exist.

"Anwar as a Muslim leader for reform and change in Malaysia has shown that under his leadership, minorities can expect and will be protected," said Gus Dur who in recent months has been vocal in support of the Ahmadiyah movement in Indonesia.

The Ahmadiyah is viewed as heretics by radical Muslim groups in Indonesia who have wreaked violence on the sect's members and property and campaigned for the movement's banning.

anwar ibrahim and gus dur former indonesia president 110808 03The issue is simmering in the nation's politics and how it is resolved is regarded as a barometer in the evolution towards democratic pluralism.

"I don't know what they [Ahmadiyah] believe but I care for their right to believe," said Gus Dur in defence of his stance. "I think it is important that minorities be protected."

Gus Dur attributed the tolerant strain in Indonesian Islam to the national philosophy encapsulated in 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika', an old Javanese term that roughly translates as 'unity in diversity'.

The philosophy is traceable to a Javanese poet of the 14th century when Indonesia was under Majapahit rule. The phrase appears in Mpu Tantular's 'Kakawin Satosome', a poem that hailed peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Buddhists.

"We in NU are for the enforcement of Islamic law in matters of family and personal law but we are not for an Islamic state," said Gus Dur.

anwar ibrahim and gus dur former indonesia president 110808 01"There's no obligation on the part of an Indonesian Muslim to be in favour of an Islamic state. That was what NU, which is the largest Islamic group in Indonesia, agreed to when it was consulted in the formulation of Indonesia's Constitution in 1945.

"In later years, NU also assented to the national ideology of Pancasila which embeds pluralism into our culture," said Gus Dur.

Hence the rich Indonesian social and cultural tapestry, limned by the poet Tantular, endures in the single garment of the polity's modern destiny.

Although Gus Dur disagreed with the suggestion that Indonesian democratic pluralism owed to western patrimony, the reality of a poet being its progenitor was confirmation of the English poet Shelley's insight: poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.