

Former Indonesian president Gus Dur dies at 69
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Former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid died in hospital on Wednesday aged 69, after a long battle with illness, a party official said.

Wahid was Indonesia's fourth president, coming to power in 1999 after the country's first general elections following the fall of military strongman Suharto in 1998.

Popularly known as Gus Dur, he was practically blind, diabetic and had suffered strokes.

Doctor Aris Wibudi of Cipto Mangunkusumo Hospital in Jakarta said Wahid died at 18:45 (7.45pm Malaysian time) due to complications arising from diabetes and stroke.

His younger brother, Salahuddin Wahid, told *AFP* the family was "shocked, sad and grieving".

"He was humorous, happy, clever, brave and really cared about the community. He was full of life and his fighting spirit was strong. Even when he was sick, he would fight on," he said.

Wahid rose to political prominence through his role as a leader of one of the country's biggest mass Islamic movements, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), having been a strong critic of Suharto during the general's three-decade rule.

He defeated Megawati Sukarnoputri to scoop the presidency in a parliamentary vote, even though her Democratic Party of Struggle put in the strongest showing in a general election earlier in 1999.

His time in government was an exciting period of democratic change under the country's post-Suharto "Reformasi" drive, and Wahid was an enthusiastic advocate of ethnic and religious tolerance.

But there were also fears the unwieldy, Muslim-majority archipelago of 234 million people would crumble under the weight of separatist and sectarian conflicts in places like Aceh, Papua and the Malukus.

Violent Islamic extremism reared its head with the coordinated Christmas-eve bombings of churches in Jakarta and other cities in 2000, which killed 18 people and were blamed on regional terror network Jemaah Islamiyah.

Wahid's response was to crack down on Islamist extremists while seeking dialogue and conciliation with ethnic separatists, the latter strategy putting him at odds both with the military and the Jakarta elite.

He also broke a taboo in Indonesian politics by calling for diplomatic relations with Israel, and backed the lifting of a Cold War-era ban on communism.

Liberal and democratic ideas

It was the liberal and democratic ideas that had earned him international respect that ironically were often at the core of the steady growth of opposition to his leadership.

A moderate religious scholar, Wahid was also criticised in office for his erratic leadership style and was sacked by the national assembly in 2001 amid unproven allegations of corruption and incompetence.

Hailing from a prominent Muslim family in Jombang, East Java, the father of four daughters held a degree in Arabic studies from Cairo University and another in literature from Baghdad University.

Despite his obvious ailments, Wahid remained active in public affairs until his death as a senior leader of the 40-million-strong NU.

NU vice-president Maskuri Abdillah said Wahid - who studied English, German, Arabic, French and Russian - would be remembered as a "pluralist" who stood for tolerance in the most populous Muslim-majority country.

"His death is a big loss not just to Nahdlatul Ulama, but also to Indonesians from all races and faiths," he told AFP.

"He was a humorous person who loved to crack jokes so people could feel at ease. He would always crack jokes at social events to reduce tension and people would warm up to him easily."

In September 2007 he announced that he would campaign for the presidency in 2009 if asked by the movement's top clerics - whom he referred to as the "elders" - but in the end he did not get the call.

Wahid's National Awakening Party won only 4.9 percent of the vote in general elections earlier this year, less than half its showing in 2004, but it remains strong in its East Java heartland.

Indonesia held its first direct presidential elections in 2004, which were won by the incumbent Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

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