

Gus Dur - untimely end of an Islamic pluralist voice
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The death of former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, 'Gus Dur' to legions of his admirers, in a Jakarta hospital yesterday deprives Southeast Asia of its pre-eminent spokesman for pluralism in Muslim politics.

For a man with his long history of ill-health, death at 69 could not be said to have come early. Still, it is untimely because Gus Dur's voice was a major one against monism: the human delusion that life is explainable by a single, overarching principle.

By leveraging on his stature as the son and grandson of pioneers of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), said to be the world's largest Muslim social organisation, Gus Dur influenced the direction of Muslim politics in his country towards democratic pluralism at a time when the country was groping following dictator Suharto's ouster in the late 1990s.

Ordinarily, a Muslim potentate like Gus Dur would be expected to be in favour of Islamist prescriptions like syariah in a time of national questing after a more equitable social order, but Gus Dur was flatly opposed to theocracy.

Though his term as Indonesian president was curtailed because of a scam over rice supplies, Gus Dur remained untainted by the dross of scandal such that while out of office he continued to extend his much-sought patronage to those on the fringes of Indonesian society.

His defense of the right to exist in Indonesia of the dissident sect, Achmadis, was a notable example of his courage in taking positions at odds with the majority of his countrymen.

In the mid-1990s, his decision to accept an invitation to the Nobel ceremony honouring peace laureate Bishop Carlos Belo, whom Jakarta suspected as a East Timorese separatist, was typical of Gus Dur's bucking of the majority view.

Support for Anwar's decision

In an interview with *Malaysiakini* in Kuala Lumpur in August 2008, that streak was evident in his support of Anwar Ibrahim's decision not to swear on the Quran as proof he was innocent of an accusation of sodomy leveled by a former aide.

In other opinions expressed in the interview, it was clear that Gus Dur was one Islamic leader who could be counted on to take the side of the rationalists against the orthodox in their recurrent debate of issues that is subsumed by what is defined as the Socratic puzzle.

This is the question that is so abstruse it gives philosophy a bad name: Is an action good because God commands it? Or does God command it because it is good?

In other words, do the categories of right and wrong have an existence independent from divine will?

Secular reason, the building blocks of democratic pluralism, says yes; theocracy holds there is no independent criterion of morality outside the will of God.

The death of Abdurrahman Wahid represents a loss to the argument that holds with the former and dissents from the latter.

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