

“Habibie on Democracy...and Habibie”

A Special Event with

H.E. B.J. Habibie

Former President of Indonesia

January 29, 2008

In March of 1998 B.J. Habibie, a scientist educated in Germany with a distinguished career in his field and 20 years as a protégé with ministerial rank in President Suharto’s cabinets, was elected vice president of Indonesia by the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR). Two months later, as Indonesia’s economic crisis deepened and calls for Suharto’s resignation mounted, the president precipitously resigned on May 21. Habibie was sworn in as president. He served until October 20, 1999, when he declined to run for president in the 1999 elections after his accountability speech to the Assembly was rejected by 51% of the vote.

During his short tenure, he dismantled the authoritarian regime set up by the two previous presidents. He immediately freed political prisoners, removed restrictions on the press and made the state Bank Indonesia independent of government. Subsequently he set in motion the withdrawal of Indonesia from East Timor, instituted the largest decentralization of government arguably in world history, and opened up the

political system to pave the way for the best elections – in 1999—since 1955.

All this was done in a way no one had anticipated. He might be called the “Accidental President,” since no one believed that Suharto ever intended to be succeeded by Habibie. If Sukarno was the Father of Independence and Suharto the Father of Development, Habibie might claim the title Father of Democracy.

Former President B.J. Habibie was in fine form as he addressed a USINDO audience in Washington DC on Indonesian democracy and U.S.-Indonesian relations on January 29 – and added revealing remarks about his brief time in history’s limelight. Those who knew him in the days when he was a minister in President Suharto’s cabinet may have wondered if the years since he stepped down as president in 1999 have mellowed him, or whether he is still his ebullient, irrepressible self.

He has mellowed indeed but he still presented a moving target as he glided around the speaker’s platform, winding

up eventually with a hand mike and a laser pointer as he turned alternately to a power point big-screen presentation behind him and then toward the audience.

He spoke as the professor in his portfolio of titles, and his topic was Democracy 101. He pointed out commonalities between the Indonesian and the U.S. constitutions, values, size, diversity and a common history of having been colonized. Both countries value freedom and independence, but these are not sufficient conditions to ensure their endurance. Education, communication and economic development are also necessary for a healthy politic. Indonesia declared independence in 1945 but it could not ensure freedom for its people as they lacked education, communication etc. having, like the United States, suffered under colonization.

Indonesian-U.S. Relations

From earliest trading ties with Aceh in the nineteenth century, the U.S. has had an increasing relationship with Indonesia. It supported Indonesian efforts to secure recognition of its independence in the 1945-49 period and was a partner with Indonesia in the anti-Communist movement during the Cold War.

A stable, strong Indonesia is important for U.S. interests in a secure and democratic world, he said. "If Indonesia had descended into chaos in 1998 [after the economic crisis and the resignation of President Suharto] would it have led to a world crisis?" he asked.

Indonesia is the cornerstone of the region. Indonesia's success in political reforms presents a role model for developing countries. Indonesia's strategic location along international maritime straits is key. Indonesia is proactive in the war against terrorism, he said. "There are convergent political and security interests between Indonesia and the United States."

Indonesia must contribute to peace and stability in Southeast Asia, he added, as it says in its Constitution that Indonesia seeks to "establish world order based on freedom, sustainable peace and social justice."

He illustrated by citing the decision he made to offer a referendum to the people of East Timor to accept or reject autonomy within the Indonesian nation. The voters overwhelmingly (78%) rejected the offer. The offer startled and alarmed politicians of all persuasions and the results outraged nationalists, becoming a major criticism of his tenure. Why did he do it?

"We had a lot of work to do on democracy," Habibie said. "I was not going to be distracted by this problem. That's the only reason." In his recently-published book, *Decisive Moments*, Habibie says that Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, although necessitated by deteriorating conditions in the former Portuguese colony, was not recognized by the international community and was a detriment to Indonesia's international standing.

However, he continued, binational relations are also influenced by occurrences elsewhere in the world. Indonesian perceptions of the U.S. have

been shaped by the U.S policies in the Middle East, especially those toward Israel and Palestine, and by the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Q: A man in the shadow suddenly achieves extraordinary accomplishments, comparable to the “100 Days” of FDR. It was a pivotal period in Indonesian history and you were the pivot. What was in your mind? How did you make it happen?

A: There were two men in power in May 1998. The elected president and the separately elected Executive Coordinator of the Keluarga Besar Golkar. I was the Coordinator, appointed by Golkar, not the President. This appointment was unexpected. We two men were of equal standing in naming a cabinet. I was the first coordinator, in 1998, who was not a military man or a politician. I never considered myself a politician.

In his book, Habibie says that he met with President Suharto on Wednesday May 20, 1998 to thrash out the names in a Reform Cabinet that the President hoped would allay the demands that he step down. They had a “lively discussion,” Habibie writes, perhaps abstaining from a stronger description of their encounter. Suharto called in the State Secretary to announce that the Reform Cabinet would be named the next day, May 21, and be sworn in on May 22. Suharto then informed Habibie he would himself resign after the Reform Cabinet was installed. Startled, Habibie writes that he asked “What is my position as Vice President?” “What happens, happens,” the president responded, and dismissed Habibie. Habibie never was permitted another

interview with Suharto. He was notified, later the same evening, that Suharto would resign the next morning, not on May 23 as he had earlier said.. At 10 a.m. on May 21, Suharto did resign and Habibie was sworn in as president by the Chief Justice. (Both men had been informed before their meeting on May 20 that 14 ministers in the existing cabinet were refusing to serve in a Reform Cabinet.)

I was president and vice president and had control of the legislature through my position in Golkar. The power was mine, to use or misuse. I used it. I had 25 years experience in Suharto’s government, and shared the heritage of 53 years’ tradition that the president is like a God. I had to change it, now or never. The president should be like your neighbor. One of the reasons I could do that was because of my values. I had a Western education, I am a scientist, and my reason and common sense told me what was right.

My first action was to separate Bank Indonesia from the government. On May 22, the day after I was sworn in as president, I named my cabinet and announced that the head of Bank Indonesia would not be included. The former status of BI as subordinate to the president was the original source of corruption. The ’45 Generation could not change this. This had to come from the Transitional Generation.

I have not seen Suharto since he stepped down. He refused to see me. On January 14 I flew from Frankfurt to Jakarta to pray for the president as he lay in hospital. I was informed ‘he doesn’t want to see you.’ (He was in a coma by this time, but the family was present in

the hospital and sent the message.) I don't care, I said. I will pray for him. I flew back to Frankfurt on the next available flight.

Q: Why don't the Indonesian elite realize that the U.S. is not anti-Islam? We helped Kuwait and Kosovo, supporting Islamic populations in those areas.

A: In democratic societies we have to live with freedom of the press.

Q: You supported Wiranto and Akbar Tanjung as potential presidential candidates in the deliberations surrounding the vote on accepting your accountability speech, but both declined to support you, in the end turning to support Abdurrahim Wahid (Gus Dur) as their candidate. Did they let you down?

A: Read my book; it's all in there. I know the details but I do not comment on this.

In the book, a delegation from the political parties arrives at Habibie's residence at 1:30 a.m. on October 20, after the tumultuous vote in the MPR rejecting his accountability speech. He relates that he confirmed to them that he would not stand for president but that someone must be selected to stand against Megawati, the PDI-P candidate. He was interrupted by an outburst from a Golkar member accusing Akbar Tanjung of being responsible for the accountability rejection. Habibie made a gesture of reassurance to Tanjung, he writes, and asked the accusers to restrain themselves.

If 51% of the MPR had accepted my accountability speech, I was available to be a candidate for election as president. If 51% rejected my account, I was not available. The vote was 51% against me. It's a democracy, after all.

My point was, in a democratic society there should be a minimum of two people contesting to take over. I approached Amien Rais, Akbar Tanjung, Wiranto and Hamzah Haz, in that order, asking if they were available. In the end they told me they had collectively decided to support Gus Dur.