

USINDO Report: Remembering Suharto: Five Ambassadors Reflect Washington DC. March 7, 2008

Five former U.S. ambassadors who served in Jakarta during the late President Suharto's long tenure offered personal reflections on their relationships with him, largely confirming the general view that he was an enigmatic and increasingly isolated leader. They offered several vignettes, however, that provided glimpses of some lesser known and contradictory qualities of the Indonesian leader. Professor Karl D. Jackson, Director of the Southeast Asia Studies at the School for International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, presided.

During the period covered there were widespread allegations of human rights abuses, especially with the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975 and the subsequent brutal occupation until the end game with the referendum in 1999 and the violent aftermath. The ambassadors acknowledged these abuses but vigorously defended U.S. policies of engagement throughout. The following are extensive excerpts from their presentations.

Edward Masters (1977-81)

Masters had first met Suharto in 1966 (during his first embassy assignment in Indonesia), after Suharto's take-over of the government following the abortive coup of September 30, 1965. "We were told to stay away," Masters said, citing Suharto's early reluctance to be seen as too influenced by outside powers. "Meetings were infrequent. Suharto knew little English, and seemed uncomfortable." The U.S. policy was not to attempt to get too close, but to help in small

practical ways. Suharto's close military colleagues were more accessible.

By the time he arrived as ambassador in late 1977 Suharto had been in power ten years. Economic development was continuing but the embassy observed that he was becoming increasingly isolated; he began distancing himself from former colleagues. "My personal dealings were excellent, but not close," Masters said. "Suharto received callers at his home, sitting in front of a large fish tank that dominated the reception room. It was a bit mesmerizing." He always smiled and nodded, as if in agreement with the caller, but Masters learned that the inferred 'yes' meant nothing if no follow up action took place. He rarely commented directly, and on several occasions resorted to indirection and elliptical responses when he did not want to disagree overtly. One occasion was December of 1979, when Masters was instructed to inform Suharto that the U.S. would shift its recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's (Communist) Republic in Beijing. Suharto's response was to tell a Javanese fable whose moral was 'Never desert your friends.' Indonesia was at the time hostile to Communist China, but had close though unofficial relations with Taiwan.

On other occasions Suharto went out of his way to be considerate and polite, even if he might have been inconvenienced. "Once I arrived for an appointment one hour early, because my secretary had misinformed me of the meeting time. I was received warmly and only later told by Suharto's aides that they had to rush out an earlier visitor in

order to receive me.” During President Carter’s presidency Suharto was not invited to the United States, ostensibly because the White House did not want to invite

Philippine President Marcos and did not want to invite Suharto without having invited Marcos. Finally, just before the end of Carter’s first term Masters was instructed to invite Suharto for an official visit to the U.S. “after the election.” “I made the best case I could in issuing the invitation. Suharto’s reply was that one of the first acts of the new Japanese prime minister was to visit Indonesia. Finally I asked if I could report that President Suharto accepted ‘in principle,’ with details to be worked out later. He nodded.” Carter lost the election, so the visit was moot.

During Masters’ tenure Indonesia’s oppressive occupation of East Timor drew increasing international criticism. Masters visited East Timor in September 1978, together with nine other ambassadors at the invitation of the Indonesian government. He sent two telegrams to Washington about what he called a “guided tour.” He reported that he was “not convinced there has been a major reduction in Indonesia’s military strength in the province,” that “the refugees we saw were in a pitiable state,” that the “economic situation in East Timor is worse than we had anticipated” and “must be seen to be believed,” and that “there is a genuine need for immediate relief.” These telegrams have been declassified and are available to the public, he said.

(He condemned a broadsheet of the East Timor and Indonesian Human Rights Network which was circulated outside the meeting that accused him of offering “extensive praise of Indonesian efforts in Timor” including that “the Indonesian military presence had been much reduced; movement was free; refugees were being cared for”; and that “Indonesia was devoted to the economic development of the province.”)

Masters said that on his return to Jakarta he complained to Indonesian officials about the “Potemkin trip.” A subsequent trip was arranged for him and representatives of the

Catholic Relief Service, AID, and other relief agencies in which they were permitted to set their own itinerary. Relief agencies were permitted to work in East Timor, “but we all regretted that it took time to overcome serious roadblocks by the Indonesian government,” he said.

Paul Wolfowitz (1986-89)

Wolfowitz recalled that Suharto was “accessible, polite, talkative” but uncommunicative. He talked in “platitudes” and repeated a set speech on economic development, poverty reduction and education. On the one occasion Suharto spoke outside the script he was uncharacteristically blunt. Wolfowitz asked him to comment on the current international efforts to pressure Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos to reform, although he knew that ASEAN leaders never commented on the internal affairs of other ASEAN members. Unexpectedly, Suharto said “Marcos is dividing the Philippine people, who should be united against communism.”

Wolfowitz witnessed an occasional rare glimpse of Suharto’s informal side when he attended the activities connected with National Family Planning Day. Suharto sat down among a group of people to talk about birth control, Wolfowitz reported, and according to his Indonesian colleagues the conversation was very specific and “earthy.” In any case Suharto seemed animated and fluent when talking to ordinary people even though his official speeches were “plodding and boring.” Another informal setting was Suharto’s cattle ranch, well known to be a favorite retreat but rarely seen by visitors. Knowing that Suharto lived simply in his modest Jakarta house, Wolfowitz expected that perhaps the ranch would be a lavish country club in disguise. But the sign on the road said only “Animal Husbandry Station,”

and in fact that's all it was. Again Suharto blossomed in this grass roots setting and volunteered to the visitors that "This cow comes from semen from Israel!"

His only colleagues were Indonesians, and the peers that he knew when he first took power were dying off or retiring. Their successors rising in the ranks of the military bureaucracy were "people who had only opened his car door or served him orange juice." No one dared speak openly, except General Benny Murdani, who on one occasion that became famous in retelling, advised Suharto that his children were causing him embarrassment. He is said to have replied "If they are doing something illegal I will stop them; otherwise it's only natural for Indonesians to take care of their families." He may have regretted having given Murdani so much power, Wolfowitz speculated, and Murdani was soon marginalized.

In one sentence of his farewell public speech Wolfowitz called for more political openness, suggesting that if greater openness was the key to economic success, the same might be said for political success as well. The sentence received wide publicity, but Wolfowitz said he never knew whether Suharto had heard about it. He was warmly received by the president at his farewell call the next day, even though he thought staff members who greeted him seemed rather cool.

Suharto did not realize the craving for openness, Wolfowitz said, and later complained it was manufactured by the foreign press. He was closed to the idea of change.

John Monjo (Chargé d'Affaires 1982-83, Ambassador 1989-92)

Suharto's isolation was well established by Monjo's arrival as ambassador. He recalled senior General Panggabean remarking that nobody could speak to the president except Widjojo, his early economic advisor who

still exerted great authority in his field. Monjo's conduit on important or difficult issues was through the State Secretariat, not directly with the president.

A rare opportunity to call on Suharto occurred when Monjo accompanied former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, who was calling on the president in his capacity as a principal of Kissinger Associates. Kissinger asked the president if he had any comment on the relative stability of the USSR and China, in these last days of the Cold War. "China will hold," the president said, "but the Soviet Union will blow apart." Kissinger later called the president "very prescient."

The economy was still growing, by double digits, although Monjo acknowledged the associated social policies involved a "degree of social engineering," especially in family planning, where the government bureaucracy exerted unsubtle pressure on families to limit the number of children.

Monjo expanded on remarks of other panelists about the "tragedy" of Suharto, that despite genuine accomplishments in economic development, his weaknesses eventually colored history's assessment of him. "It's possible to outlive your time in history," Monjo said. "Nevertheless, with Indonesia one can be optimistic. There is more unity and strength than one might suppose. Despite the violence that surrounded East Timor's exit from Indonesian occupation, this did not precipitate an explosion in the country. And the ties that develop between individuals – Americans and Indonesians – tend to be life-long."

Robert Barry (1992-95)

"My arrival was not auspicious," Barry said. "I was scheduled to go to Yugoslavia, but it was not a good time to go there. I was offered Indonesia instead, and accepted. But because of my background [he had served in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and

coordinated US assistance to Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of communist governments in the region] I became known as the expert in countries that are breaking up.”

Suharto was now accessible to few others besides his children and crony Bob Hasan. Even his staff did not know his mind, Barry said. He relied on two of those few: longtime American advisor Col. George Benson, and Vice President Habibie.

East Timor was now a big issue. “I bemoaned the state of East Timor, but I wasn’t sure it was ready for independence. I still think that, as I do about Kosovo.”

The fears of Suharto about Indonesia breaking up [a subject of much speculation at the time] have receded with time as the country proceeds, Barry noted.

Stapleton Roy (1996-99)

“I arrived to a very different situation,” Roy said. Suharto had already been in power more than 25 years. All the others from his early time had left the government. There was no one to speak frankly to him. Foreign ambassadors were considered at the level of butlers. My only private meeting with Suharto was in presenting my credentials; at other times I was just escorting delegations. There were no trips or private meetings. Everything was very formal.” When Suharto met with foreign leaders his set speech never altered: economic development and poverty reduction.

There was a palpable feeling we were nearing the end, Roy said. “I was stunned when even Indonesians told me it was time to move on.”

Coming from his ambassadorial assignment in China, Roy noted that Indonesia was much more open. The press discussed things that the Chinese press couldn’t touch. The press dared to cross many lines, including calling elections a ‘farce.’ When

the Indonesian government cracked down on Tempo magazine there was a strong reaction from the Indonesian elite.

Dramatic developments soon presaged the end game. The government moved against the PDI-P political party with a crackdown on its conference in Medan in 1996. In September 1997 the Asian financial crisis hit Indonesia, which initially had responded well, with full force.

Then, in December 1997 Suharto was struck by severe illness. Previously no one had dared speak openly of a transition except the political opposition leaders Amien Rais and Megawati. Only after that did people begin to speak out. But by January 1998 he had recovered and seemed determined to hang on, Roy said.

When he was reelected in March 1998 the economic outlook was gloomy. The conflict with the International Monetary Fund created a decline in the rupiah, which exacerbated economic hardships. Throughout all this Suharto maintained his thoroughly Javanese character: an ability to conceal his inner thoughts; and a dignity with which he conducted himself even when being upbraided by younger and foreign officials.

Finally, in May 1998, violent riots broke out while Suharto was on a visit to Egypt. Defections from his own cabinet culminated in his abrupt resignation May 22.

“It was a tragic end to a period of considerable accomplishment. Suharto did not recognize that Indonesian economic development required changes in the political system. He made no provision for changes. His indulgences of his family undermined his moral authority. He did not understand that,” Roy said. “The failure to recognize how to deal with the end game can determine judgment on the whole regime.”

He did not prepare Indonesia for democracy, which – to the surprise of many – has continued to develop since. But he deserves credit that Indonesian is better off than when he started. And he created some of the underpinnings of democracy, Roy said.

Q (comment): During the late '60s and early '70s there was an open invitation to the diplomatic corps to attend wayang kulit performances at the palace. Suharto was in the first row, and stayed throughout the night until the performance ended the next morning. He was a keen follower of wayang and may have learned his political wisdom from these dramas. His later turn to Islam was not genuine.

Wolfowitz: He was certainly sophisticated. His opacity is part of the culture but also can convey deep wisdom. There were many stories of his going to sacred spots. I don't think he turned to Islam at all. He created ICMI (the association of Muslim intellectuals) to counter the threat to his power from Abdurrahman Wahid and from Christians in the military.

Q: What did the U.S. do wrong regarding East Timor?

Monjo: I was there (in 1975) when Indonesia was about to invade East Timor. We said nothing negative. Was that compliance? The United States accepted East Timor's integration as part of Indonesia even though we did not think the invasion was the proper procedure.

Masters: The telegram reporting Suharto's talk with President Ford and Secretary Kissinger in Jakarta just before the invasion is now declassified. Suharto said 'We have to do this,' and we said 'We understand. Do it quickly and neatly.' Was that the right or wrong thing to do? Probably, if we told them not to they would have invaded anyway. Maybe taking East Timor over was the right thing for Indonesia to do, given the civil strife in the area at the time, but they messed it up. They took over the coffee

trade; they sent Javanese bureaucrats to govern. They became Javanese colonialists instead of Portuguese.

Roy: East Timor is a classic case of how countries can mismanage. Everyone deserves blame for East Timor. It is to the credit only of President Habibie to have gotten rid of the troublesome albatross.

Wolfowitz: We didn't have any say in East Timor. It was an Indonesian decision. I heard that Suharto was initially opposed to going in. He was concerned about opening the issue of other defections from the nation.

In 1975 communism was on the march in Asia. In hindsight it may have been better to let East Timor 'stew in its own juice.' No one foresaw how brutal the outcome would be. And Indonesia did try to develop the province. They spent more there than in any other province. I would give Habibie a B or B minus. I think independence could have been achieved in a better, slower way. I think Xanana Gusmao and Megawati wanted a slower process.

Q: Please comment on the role, or lack thereof, of the military in the downfall of Suharto? The military did not suppress the revolt that led to his downfall. They didn't create a 'straw man' to take over nominally but to retain real power. If Suharto laid the underpinnings of democracy, how, if anything, did he create the conditions for the military to step back?

Roy: The military was badly divided. The commanders were people who had come up through staff assignments that were not considered a road to power. There was suspense at the time Suharto stepped down. Would the military move in? It was a tense period, even after Habibie was sworn in. The military was constrained because Suharto had effectively undermined it.

Wolfowitz: I believe the violence in 1998 was created by Prabowo. (General Prabowo Subianto was Suharto's son in law).

Masters: Suharto doesn't deserve credit for keeping the TNI (military) from staging coups. That restraint was ingrained from the very beginning of TNI history, in the fight for independence. The highest loyalty was to the president and the constitution; the preservation of the nation.

Monjo: Suharto never tried to plan a transition. He suppressed every potential leader. But he did do something for education and for creating a middle class. So he created some underpinnings of democracy even if it wasn't his intention.

Q: No one has talked about human rights, nor how the U.S. empowered Suharto.

A: Masters: Human rights have always been important to the United States. My mandate under President Carter was to see that 35,000 accused communists imprisoned on Buru Island were given due process. The release of prisoners started under my predecessor Ambassador David Newsom; in two years all but 200 were released, and those were given a process. Our failings in East Timor? East Timor was a disaster, but could we have done anything about it? The best thing was to work with like-minded Indonesians to get humanitarian aid to the people.

Wolfowitz: Our approach was to work quietly rather than openly. Indonesians had no doubt about our attitudes. Our influence was limited. Indonesia was a self-sufficient and insular place. Even the most democratic Indonesians were not in favor of more liberal policies toward East Timor or Aceh.

Monjo: We have also pressed for reforms in Papua. If we had gotten on a soap box it would have brought a nationalistic reaction.

Q: (comment): I am an Indonesian and I was born during Suharto's rule. We all thought he was a king. Kings die in office. He was not expected to relinquish his rule.

A: Monjo: I agree. He thought he was anointed.

Wolfowitz: I believe he thought he was indispensable.

Q: Many were abducted when Suharto was in power. Many were kidnapped and murdered. Suharto was involved in killing one million people in 1965. There were many incidents of violence and killing during his time: Taman Sari, Tanjung Priok. No one has ever been tried for these crimes. We need to know and to acknowledge what happened. Let's not forget about this.

A: Wolfowitz: I agree with you.

Roy: The U.S. Embassy was very aware. There was extensive reporting and interventions.

Monjo: I agree in part. But I recall, in 1965, the wife of one of Indonesia's leading moderates saying to me "If they had won, we'd all be dead."

Q: What is important for the new American president in 2009 to know about Indonesia?

A: Barry: Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country and is a democracy. It is important geopolitically and economically, for trade and investment.

Roy: Indonesia's record over 50 years of independence is truly remarkable. Other nations, such as Burma and the Congo, were better prepared for independence. Indonesia was not. It is a tribute to the Indonesian people, to their friends and to the region.

Wolfowitz: Indonesia is the key to stability in Southeast Asia.