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Yudhoyono's Legacy: Between Politics and Principle

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Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia's president since 2004, will step down in 2014. Known as SBY (es-bay-yay) to Indonesians, he is still, toward the end of his second term, a mystery to many. Does he merit being this year's recipient of the World Statesman Award for religious tolerance? Or is he a hypocrite who goes through the motions of shaking hands with the powerful, while Indonesians kill their fellows of different faiths and the police stand by? Is he a member in good standing of the global establishment, helping to guide the United Nations' post-2015 development agenda as co-chair of the Secretary General's eminent persons group? Or is he, as some human rights activists charge, an international criminal responsible for atrocities committed in Papua, Indonesia's half of the island of New Guinea?

As a US-educated general serving under the dictator Suharto, who ruled from 1966 to 1998, Yudhoyono was known as one of the freer thinkers in a doctrinaire Indonesian military. In the late 1990s, in light of Indonesia's developing economy, civil society, and politics, Yudhoyono suggested the time might have come for the military to reconsider its political role. He was dubbed “the thinking general” by the press. When other top-ranking military men lost luster in the violence that surrounded Suharto's fall and the early transition to democracy, Yudhoyono was well positioned to step up to the highest levels.

He served as minister of mines and coordinating minister for political and security affairs in the governments of Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri in 1999–2004, stepping down from active military service. In Megawati's

government, Yudhoyono took overall charge of the fight against terrorism, a particularly vital role in the wake of a 2002 bombing in Bali, which killed more than 200 people. He also played an important role in bringing an end to Christian-Muslim violence that had killed thousands in the eastern areas of Ambon and Poso.

CAN-DO POLITICIAN

SBY is considered charismatic by Indonesians, though his is not a bombastic charisma but a quieter confidence, combined with reasonableness and effectiveness. On the campaign trail, women found him handsome. He is known for his singing and has even released several albums. He kept his pledges vague during the 2004 presidential campaign. One of his promises was an Indonesia “at peace, just, and prosperous.” SBY never put much meat on the bones of this slogan in terms of specific policies, but Indonesians were still attracted to the hope the former general was selling. Also, SBY benefited from timing: His popularity peaked at just the right moment for the country's first direct presidential election.

The Partai Demokrat (PD) supported Yudhoyono's candidacy in the 2004 elections, but he stayed somewhat aloof from it to avoid appearing narrowly partisan. Though he finished first in the July balloting, with 33.6 percent of the vote, he failed to clear 50 percent, so the race was pushed to a second round, pitting him against Megawati, the incumbent. Yudhoyono's support continued to rise over the next months, and he handily won the September runoff with 60.6 percent of the vote.

SBY's steady rise over 2004 was the result of his personality, generic promises, and good timing, but he also rode a wave of reaction against everyone else in Indonesian politics. Indonesians gen-

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erally dislike and distrust their political parties, which they view as short-termist, power-hungry, quarrelsome, devoid of ideology, and corrupt. Yudhoyono benefited from appearing different from the other candidates, staying above the fray, and exuding a can-do confidence.

By 2004, Indonesia had been going through crises for years. Politics was unstable, plagued by coup rumors, an impeachment, and dueling protests. Secessionist movements, communal violence, and terrorist attacks had undermined security. The economy was weak, unable to find a secure footing since growth had plunged in the Asian financial crisis of 1998. A little over two months into Yudhoyono's presidency, a massive earthquake and tsunami struck the island of Sumatra, killing 170,000 and displacing at least 500,000 more.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly given this inauspicious beginning, when he departs the presidency in 2014, Yudhoyono will leave an Indonesia in which politics, while messy, is increasingly played according to the rules, peace has been made with one major secessionist group, terrorists are on the run due to firm presidential action, and the economy has returned to growth of 6 percent or more per year.

So what is SBY's legacy? He has walked a middle path between smart politics and noble principles. How you view his time in office depends on whether you are inside or outside Indonesia, whom you ask, when you ask, and whether you take a long- or short-term perspective.

INTERNATIONAL STATESMAN

Outside Indonesia, Yudhoyono's star could hardly shine brighter. He has served as one of three co-chairs of the Panel of Eminent Persons reviewing the UN's post-Millennium Development Goals approach to international development, along with Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and British Prime Minister David Cameron. In 2010, he was knighted in Australia for stabilizing Indonesian-Australian relations; his "steadfast and humane" attitude in the fight against terrorism was praised in the official citation. In 2011, former US Vice President Al Gore lauded him for his work to reduce climate change. In 2012, Yudhoyono promised at the Rio+20 UN conference on sustainable development to reduce Indonesia's

carbon emissions by 26 percent by 2020 (or more with international help); he also put in place a moratorium on logging in primary forest lands. In 2013, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization presented him with an award for his successes in poverty reduction. SBY's fluent English and avoidance of tub-thumping help explain these accolades. He is a reasonable man. Counterparts in other countries and in international organizations appreciate this.

When he took office, SBY sought to elevate Indonesia's position on the international stage. In his first major foreign policy address, in 2005, he highlighted Indonesia's status as the largest Muslim nation in the world, the fourth-largest nation, and the third-largest democracy. Yudhoyono has particularly sought to play a role in communication between the West and the Muslim world. After *Jyllands Posten*, a Danish newspaper, in 2005 published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were perceived to be offensive to Muslims, SBY positioned himself as a mediator, writing a *New York Times* op-ed in which he called reprinting the

cartoons to make a point about free speech "senseless brinkmanship." He suggested that if freedom were only construed as freedom to offend Islam, this would turn Muslims away from democracy, a potent remark in the context of a democratizing

Indonesia and the then-dire state of Iraq. Yudhoyono made the point that democracy had to encompass both "freedom and tolerance." At the UN in 2012, he proposed a resolution calling for a ban on defamation of religions and religious symbols, while also urging a dialogue among members of different faiths.

Indonesia's star has risen along with Yudhoyono's. Indonesia is in the enviable position internationally of being friends with almost everyone and enemies with almost no one. Relations with Australia, the United States, and China all have bright spots. Indonesia has a new security cooperation agreement with Australia. Indonesian officials expressed concern about the expansion of US bases in northern Australia as part of President Barack Obama's 2011 announcement of a strategic "pivot" to Asia; but nationalist hackles aside, the American presence is helpful to Indonesians concerned about the rise of China. The relationship with Beijing is more complex. China's growth presents an opportunity, fueling booms in many

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of the commodities that Indonesia exports, and increasingly serving as a source of investment. But China is also a threat. Its ambiguous intentions in the South China Sea, where it has made extensive territorial claims, pose an immediate security challenge. China is also an economic competitor, taking investment and trade opportunities that might once have gone to Indonesia (in sectors such as textiles, shoes, and electronics).

Indonesia has long led the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Yudhoyono's government has played a role in pushing ASEAN in a more democratic direction, as with the ASEAN Charter (2007) and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (2009). Given the preponderance of authoritarian regimes in ASEAN, the human rights apparatus is more of an aspiration than a reality at this time. Still, simply by formally talking about the importance of human rights and democracy, the group has taken significant steps away from its old mantra of non-interference in internal affairs. Projecting its new democracy in its foreign policy, Indonesia demanded that Myanmar, an ASEAN partner, release opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from detention. However, in Yudhoyono's typical middle-way style, Indonesia has managed to express support for democracy while avoiding making enemies among its neighbors, declining to vote for harsh sanctions and censure motions against them at the UN.

Indonesia has staked a great deal on hosting the Bali Democracy Forum each year. This event, which is "about democracy, not of democracies," in the words of former Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda, has been held annually since 2008. It invites both democracies (Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea) and non-democracies (China, Brunei, Myanmar, and Iran), and has regularly attracted a number of heads of state and government. In his address to the fifth forum, Yudhoyono proclaimed that the event had become part of the "democratic architecture" of the region. He highlighted the importance of democracy at home (delighting the West), but also the importance of bringing democracy to the international system, particularly to the outdated UN Security Council (delighting the rest). The Bali forum has grown from 40 countries and international organizations in 2008 to 80 in 2012. Its rise, even as a

mere talking shop, is a tribute to Indonesia's, and Yudhoyono's, regional heft.

LIBERAL FRUSTRATIONS

Inside Indonesia, attitudes toward SBY depend on whom you ask and when you ask. Liberal intellectuals have long been frustrated with Yudhoyono's kowtowing to one constituency or another in order to preserve his coalition, seeing him as playing politics rather than standing on principle. Yudhoyono may be president, but he needs a broad coalition in parliament, represented in his cabinet, in order to get things done.

In 2006, a company controlled by Aburizal Bakrie—who is now the head of Golkar, the ruling party under Suharto—was drilling for natural gas in East Java. Near the exploration site, a mudflow began spewing out of the ground. This was not just a minor inconvenience. It turned into a "mud volcano," burying homes and cropland with hundreds of thousands of square meters of mud, and it is expected to keep erupting for 20 to 30 years. Bakrie's company has continuously attempted to deflect responsibility for the disaster.

Yudhoyono, who needs Bakrie's Golkar as part of the ruling coalition, has let the company escape many commitments to compensate villagers.

In 2012, the government even took over responsibility for some payments to victims. Cynics believe this was payment for Golkar's support of an unpopular attempt by Yudhoyono to curb fuel subsidies, finally coming into effect in 2013. Liberals wish Yudhoyono had held Bakrie accountable for the damage his company caused, but this principle did not survive the imperatives of coalition politics.

In other rights cases frustrating to liberals, SBY did not work vigorously to ensure the prosecution of Suharto, either for his brutal reign (500,000 Communists or suspected Communists killed in 1965–66; 200,000 people killed in East Timor during Indonesia's 1975–1999 occupation of that territory; and the everyday repression that Indonesians endured for decades) or for corruption (Suharto and his family were estimated to have amassed at least \$15 billion). Suharto's lawyers cited his ill health; the court finally accepted this argument in 2006, and SBY made no attempt to force the issue. When Suharto died two years later, SBY praised his "great service to the nation,"

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declared a week of mourning, and invited “all the people of Indonesia to pray that the deceased’s good deeds and dedication to the nation may be accepted by God the almighty.”

Suharto-era holidays celebrating the military’s vanquishing of the Communists are still officially celebrated. School textbooks continue to relay Suharto-era interpretations of history to a new generation. Again, political imperatives have taken precedence. Yudhoyono has tried to focus on the future; in his view, digging up the wrongs of the past would be extremely divisive, perhaps tearing asunder the president’s fragile coalition and even unleashing new violence.

SURFING THE ISLAMIC WAVE

Liberals have also lamented the creeping Islamization of Indonesia during SBY’s rule. In the past decade, a variety of measures have been put in place at the national level (such as a 2008 anti-pornography law) and at local levels (measures against prostitution, gambling, and alcohol, as well as stipulations requiring Muslim dress, Koran reading, and payment of Islamic charity). While Yudhoyono’s PD emerged from the nationalist stream in the country’s politics, the party describes itself as “nationalist-religious.” This is in keeping with a trend in many of Indonesia’s parties to blur the lines between nationalism and Islam. As a practical matter, there are more votes available to those who can recruit pious Muslim voters, because Indonesians have become increasingly religious since the 1970s. This rising piety is a result of events of the 1970s such as the rise of OPEC and the Iranian Revolution, which spurred Muslim pride. It also spreads through globalization, technology, education, and other factors.

Yudhoyono also finds himself in the position of needing a number of Muslim-leaning political parties as part of his coalition and government. So, rather than holding the line against the rising tide of Islamization as a good secularist might, he has surfed the Islamic wave, recognizing the power of Islamic symbols in politics but speaking out frequently for tolerance and inter-faith understanding. Many liberals hoped the president would stand up for the principles of artistic expression, cultural diversity, women’s freedom, and the like. They soured on him when he acquiesced to what they saw as puritanical Islam-inspired regulations.

In addition, attacks on minority faiths have caused concern. Indonesia’s Pancasila ideology, which stresses belief in God but not in a particu-

lar God, is supposed to undergird tolerance in the nation’s plural population (86 percent Muslim but with significant numbers of Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, and others). Yet, as the Setara Institute, an Indonesian NGO, has pointed out, Yudhoyono’s mild exhortations to tolerance leave no “footprint.” In fact, the numbers tell the tale. Violent attacks on religious minorities have risen from 216 in 2010 to 244 in 2011, and to 264 in 2012. Christian churches have been bombed. “Illegal” churches have been demolished. Christians claim that they cannot build new churches or that building plans are delayed for years.

It is not just a problem of Muslim-Christian relations. Conflicts with minorities exist within Islam as well. Laws in 26 provinces target members of the Ahmadiyah sect, considered heretical by the mainstream Sunnis who dominate in Indonesia. A decree by the religious affairs minister in 2008 told Ahmadis to stop spreading their deviant interpretations of Islam. In one egregious example of sectarian violence in 2011, a mob attacked an Ahmadi compound in Cikeusik, Banten, on Java. Three Ahmadis were beaten to death. You can watch the attack on YouTube (the perpetrators were kind enough to film it): see the killers laugh over the corpses, listen to them shout “God is great,” and watch the police stand aside to allow the violence to occur. In the sometimes funhouse-mirror-like world of Indonesian criminal justice, one of the Ahmadi victims was sentenced to more jail time than the ringleaders of the attack, who themselves received just three to six months.

Shiite Muslims have also faced persecution in Indonesia. In 2012, Shiites were driven out of Sampang, Madura, and two were killed. Instead of the state standing up to protect the minorities, they were told to leave, effectively “cleansing” the area, according to Human Rights Watch.

Why hasn’t Yudhoyono put his foot down? I’ll answer this way: Why do US politicians like Barack Obama and Mitt Romney not take on the hard left or hard right respectively of their own parties? The logic is the same for mainstream Sunni politicians like Yudhoyono in Indonesia. He cannot condemn the activists (in this case purporting to defend orthodox Islamic belief) because of the risk of alienating his own supporters in the center, and, in newly democratic Indonesia, every supporter actually does count.

The fact is that many Muslims in Indonesia believe Ahmadis are heretics. An opinion poll by the Indonesian Survey Circle in 2012 found 47

percent of Indonesians would feel uncomfortable living next to an Ahmadi, while only 15 percent would feel uncomfortable living next to a Christian (how's that for inter-faith understanding?). It would seem Yudhoyono can assert the values of tolerance all he wants, but he cannot cross the line of siding with supposed blasphemers. Again and again, democracy leaves Yudhoyono between the principle of tolerance he professes so often and the smart politics he has needed to practice to stay in power.

RISING DISSATISFACTION

Despite these weaknesses pointed out by Indonesian liberals, anticorruption campaigners, human rights activists, and others, SBY was well regarded by the general public through his first term. His post-tsunami reconstruction efforts in Northern Sumatra used resources well. In 2005, he secured a peace deal with Acehese rebels who had been engaged in a separatist campaign since the 1970s. With these and other successes, particularly economic improvements, SBY romped to reelection in 2009 in a single round, with 60.8 percent of the vote.

But SBY has had a rougher time in recent years. Several polls have suggested rising popular—not just liberal—dissatisfaction. In 2011, the Indonesian Survey Institute found SBY's approval rating down; urban and educated Indonesians were even more dissatisfied with him than rural, less-educated people. In 2013, an Indonesian Survey Circle poll found 70 percent dissatisfied with him.

Corruption is certainly taking a toll on Yudhoyono's popularity. He came into office promising “zero tolerance” of graft, but his overwhelming attitude has been one of neglect. He often calls for allowing the legal process to run its course in these cases. This was his response in 2009 to a farcical attempt by some in the police and attorney general's office to kneecap the Corruption Eradication Commission by fabricating evidence against two of its top officials. Citizens took to the streets and to Facebook to save the commission.

Recently, the corruption scandals have come painfully close to the president himself. Four top officials associated with the PD have been investigated in cases played out in excruciating detail in the media. As of this writing, two PD leaders have been jailed; two others are under investigation.

Further, SBY's close allies in the Islamic-leaning Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), have been implicated in a scandal over beef and cattle imports, involving hotel rooms, women, cars, watches, and suitcases full of cash. (Opponents of the clean-government advocating, notionally puritanical PKS can't hide their Schadenfreude.)

Over the course of Yudhoyono's two terms, Indonesia's Transparency International ranking has risen slightly from 133rd worldwide to 118th (1st is least corrupt), but Indonesians may find this hard to reconcile with what they read in the papers.

ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

Indonesia's economy has certainly come a long way over the course of SBY's presidency. Having overcome the crisis of the late 1990s, when it required aid from the International Monetary Fund, and the anemic growth of the early 2000s, Indonesia is positively buoyant now, with annual growth rates hovering above 6 percent from 2010 to 2012.

Much of this success is owed to Yudhoyono's prudent management. Indonesia's public debt is a relatively small 25 percent of GDP, down from 61 percent in 2003 before SBY took the reins. In December 2011, both Fitch and Moody's classified the country's bonds as investment grade, a milestone in the climb back from the depths of the Asian financial crisis. Yudhoyono has championed difficult programs such as cutting fuel subsidies. This is hard to do in Indonesia and often provokes protests. But, as Yudhoyono recognizes, fuel subsidies absorb too much of the government budget (roughly a quarter of the total), and their benefits flow most to those who need them least.

Yudhoyono has also prioritized poverty alleviation, using both unconditional (*Bantuan Langsung Tunai*) and conditional cash transfers (*Program Keluarga Harapan*) to aid the poor. The poverty rate, which was 23 percent at the height of the financial crisis in 1999, is now just 12 percent. Unemployment dropped from more than 11 percent in 2006 to just 5.9 percent in May 2013.

Of course, China's remarkable growth has contributed to Indonesia's economic success. Indonesia produces many of the primary products that China is gobbling hungrily today, such as coal, bauxite, palm oil, and nickel. Some are

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skeptical of Indonesia's deeper economic strength, though. Northern Illinois University's Michael Buehler worries that Indonesia's growth is "neither sustainable nor inclusive," despite Yudhoyono's promotion of sustainable growth along with equity as key economic goals. Buehler argues that Indonesia manufactures "essentially nothing." The *Economist*, generally more bullish on Indonesia's past decade, warns that recent growth could be hobbled by weaknesses in infrastructure. Anyone who has lost hours daily in Jakarta's infamous *macet* (traffic on steroids) would agree.

The Heritage Foundation's 2013 Index of Economic Freedom shows mixed results for the Yudhoyono years. Financial freedom has improved over SBY's time, but trade freedom may have dropped a bit. In 2010, Yudhoyono threw his well-regarded finance minister, Sri Mulyani Indrawati, under the bus after she had had one too many run-ins with status quo interests in Indonesia, particularly Aburizal Bakrie of Golkar (he of the mudflow). The result since Sri Mulyani's departure has been increased state intervention in the economy. Nevertheless, Heritage found business freedom remained level across Yudhoyono's two terms, though labor freedom remained repressed.

DEMOCRACY IN PROGRESS

If we take a longer-term perspective to evaluate Indonesia's political condition after Yudhoyono's years in office, we find a country that is more comfortable with the processes of democracy. Freedom House upgraded Indonesia to "free" status in 2006, citing the direct presidential election, regional elections of mayors and governors, and Yudhoyono's successful conclusion of a peace agreement with the secessionist Acehnese.

In Indonesia, speech is largely free and the press is too, though much of the latter is of poor quality. Elections are meaningful in determining who governs, they are regularly held, and the results are respected. Islamic parties have been among the most vociferous defenders of democratic politics in the new Indonesia. Citizens have the freedom to organize and protest (and protest and protest), but these activities can still lead to violent repression for unions, Papuans, and others. Videos of Papuans being tortured have gone viral over the past few years, putting the ugliest face of Indonesian rule on global public display.

Further, on democracy's downside, Yudhoyono has done little to rein in the military institutionally. According to Marcus Mietzner in his book

The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia, the military has shown "political restraint" during the Yudhoyono years, but this is potentially reversible under a less competent leader or in less auspicious circumstances. Many of the top political parties are strewn with brass, and military men look set to feature prominently in the 2014 presidential campaign. (Watch for Suharto's former son-in-law Prabowo Subianto.)

Yudhoyono has also failed to institutionalize his policies in a great political party that can carry on his work; absent his wife or son as standard-bearer, the PD may see its support largely disappear without SBY in 2014. Minority rights are upheld in rhetoric but are not reliable in practice. Rule of law is not secure, either. Indonesia's court system, while improved since Suharto's fall with additions such as the Constitutional Court, is still replete with problems ranging from authoritarian holdovers to corruption, including the buying of verdicts.

Yudhoyono's greatest legacy is that he will step down in 2014. No one is talking about rewriting the constitution to keep him in office, as happens so often elsewhere. Under his rule, Indonesia has moved from the tentative steps of the immediate post-Suharto period to a new normal. Indonesian democracy, with all its strengths and weaknesses, lives to fight another day. Yudhoyono will leave behind a legacy of pragmatic rule that has brokered peace agreements, limited prospects for secession, delivered economic benefits, cornered terrorists, and built positive relations internationally. He will also leave a legacy of the former regime's crimes unexamined, and victims largely unvindicated, whether they are accused Communists, East Timorese, Papuans, Ahmadis, Shiites, or human rights activists.

After all the fuss about his World Statesman Award for religious tolerance in 2013, SBY noted in his acceptance speech that "statesmanship can be collective." He is right. Part of SBY's legacy is that he has not made the past 10 years happen on his own. Other political parties, politicians, civil society activists, generals, and millions of ordinary citizens have added their voices to the Indonesian story—quite a change from the Suharto years. Throughout, SBY has maneuvered in a minefield of politics to walk a narrow line among the ambitious hopes of reformers, the retrograde schemes of old-regime die-hards, and the ardent dreams of Islamists. In a testament to Indonesia's new democracy, he has been accountable to most of the people most of the time. ■