

Suharto's Death Shows 'Reformasi' Merely Shift in Power

Tuesday 29 January 2008, by [YAMIN Kafil](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2008).

The death of former Indonesian president Suharto shows the country's 'reformasi' (reformation) as nothing more than a shift in power instead of a gradual process to democracy, say analysts here.

Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono puts soil into the grave of former Indonesian president Suharto at Astana Giribangun family mausoleum in Karanganyar regency, Indonesia's Central Java [Photo: Reuters]

The former dictator died Sunday at the age of 87 after 24 days of intensive medical treatment in the Pertamina Hospital in Jakarta. He was buried Monday in the graveyard of Javanese kings, Astana Giribangun, in Central Java, with a military ceremony led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

While his predecessor Sukarno was confined to house arrest until his death, Suharto never went to court to face the numerous allegations against him after he stepped down in May 1998.

The charges against him included abuse of power, misuse of funds, corruption, and human rights violations, including atrocities committed against alleged members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1965.

Several of his business cronies, such as timber baron Mohammad 'Bob' Hasan and even his youngest son Hutomo 'Tommy' Mandala Putra, were dragged into court and served time in jail, but Suharto remained untouchable.

Pressure for a trial steadily weakened until the Supreme Court closed the cases against Suharto for health reasons. "It is hardly surprising, however; the law institutions did not work when Suharto was in good condition," said a frustrated Amien Rais, former chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) and Suharto's number one enemy.

The apparently lackluster law enforcement was accompanied by the incapability of the four new governments that took office after 1998, as reflected by incessant political conflicts, instability, communal strife, economic decline and growing poverty.

"The incapability of the new government makes the people yearn for the Suharto era, when prices of basic necessities were affordable, streets were safe from rallies and anarchism, and jobs were easy to find," said Mohammad Ainun Najib, a popular columnist.

The truth is, Suharto still reigns in the heart of people in the villages, despite the fanfare of democracy brought by the new governments—from Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri to the present Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

"To me, Suharto is the best. When he was in power, fertilizer was abundant and affordable,

irrigation worked well. So farming, which is my inherited and only skill, was a reliable business for living," said Warid, a farmer in Lagadar village in West Java.

Ahmad Syafi'ie, a former employee of Indonesia's state-owned aircraft manufacturing firm (IPTN), distinguishes the days of Suharto's era from the present reformasi times. "I was fired from my job not long after Suharto's fall," he said. "And instead of finding a new job, I even get new jobless fellows. Factories and companies closed down and so I have more friends."

Initially, as Najib sees it, the people were of the view that Suharto had been in power too long and they were looking for something new. But this 'something new' has not yet appeared.

"Yes, the people called for a change. A change for the better. Then when in fact what comes is even worse, they turn back to Suharto," he maintained.

But Badri Khaeruman, a lecturer at the Bandung State Islamic University (UIN), said "Let's make it simple: give him (Suharto) forgiveness and maintain what is good of him."

For rights activists, however, things are not that simple. "What about the millions of people, alleged members of the PKI, who were murdered without trial? How about those who were kidnapped and are still missing? We respect Suharto, definitely. But we also respect those victims of his oppressive rule. All men are equal before the law," said Fajrun, an activist in Jakarta.

Sukarno's daughter Sukmawati Sukarnoputri joined her voice to the chorus, saying that "Suharto did a lot of good things to the nation in terms of economic development, social welfare and stability, but that does not necessarily mean mercy for his mistakes, atrocities, corruption and oppression during his rule."

Former president Abdurrahman Wahid, meanwhile, is adamant that Suharto's record should be further investigated, and that the courts should rule on the wrongs committed under his rule, saying that "Only after that can we give him forgiveness."

"How can we forgive someone when it is not clear what his mistakes were?" he asked.

But Suharto has gone to his eternal resting place without ever standing trial, and more and more people are choosing to forgive and forget. Which indicates, according to Najib, that Indonesians have not yet embraced democracy, but are merely caught up in internal political power struggles.

P.S.

* From The Irrawaddy:

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10061

* Kafil Yamin/IPS Writer/Jakarta.