



A portrait of former president of Indonesia Suharto is removed from the walls of an army barracks in Jakarta one day after he resigned.

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Farewell to the Smiling General

Reflections on Suharto
By Michael Vatikiotis

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The death of former Indonesian President Suharto in January triggered a wave of national mourning and an occasion to reflect on his contributions to the nation, good and bad. Veteran journalist Michael Vatikiotis provides a personal take on the man who ruled Indonesia for 32 years — and the mysticism and mysteries he left in his wake.

THE LONG, LINGERING DEATH of former President Suharto of Indonesia was infused with the imperial drama and arcane mysticism that colored his long rule. In scenes that recalled the mystical parody of tyranny woven by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his *Autumn of the Patriarch*, rarely was a death so anticipated, so discussed, dissected, and mythologized even as it happened. There were harried teams of doctors expressing amazement at the old man's vitality in the face of multiple organ failure; frantic attempts to have corruption charges stacked against him settled out of court before he slipped from this world into the next; and bizarrely ostentatious preparations for his burial in central Java, which included passing out press passes for the graveside long before there was even a body to bury.

Then, naturally, there was upheaval in the Javanese spiritual world. Mediums in central Java reported unusual earth tremors, flooding and the felling of sacred trees as Suharto's condition worsened. There were concerns that without proper removal of the magical amulet (*ageman*) and heavenly light (*pulung*), spiritual implants that endowed Suharto with supernatural powers, his suffering would be prolonged. There was speculation about the best day to die — definitely not a Saturday, for that would mean another family member dying soon afterwards. Meanwhile, outside the Pertamina Hospital where the former President was being treated, there were people who prayed for his recovery clutching the Koran, and those who demonstrated and demanded that even now, as the old dictator drifted in and out of consciousness surrounded by sobbing relatives and whirring life support machinery, he should be brought to trial. An editorial in *Tempo* magazine opined somewhat absurdly: "Suharto is a part of our past. He did good things and bad things."

In the end, Suharto edged past Saturday and died on a Sunday, slipping into a coma on January 28 and leaving this world just after one in the afternoon. A somber looking President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who served as a general in Suharto's army, declared a week-long period of national mourning and asked the na-

tion to pray for the soul of the second and longest-serving president of the 60-year-old republic. Suharto's was actually the first-ever state funeral of a former president, since the country's founder and first President Sukarno died in 1970, alone and helped only by a vet.

Who was Suharto, and what kind of personality lurked behind the impassive, always smiling man who is commonly portrayed as an authoritarian dictator? Much of what we know about this son of a minor irrigation official from Kemusuk, a small village outside Yogyakarta, is based on either hyperbole or assumption. Suharto has left little in the way of a written legacy except for a ghost-written memoir and a quirky compilation of homespun sayings. He very rarely gave interviews and those who knew him well tend to spin their views to put themselves in a good light. Much of the serious biography of the man is written by foreigners. Yet Suharto loomed large in the lives of ordinary Indonesians for three decades. A quiet but assertive omnipresence is how I remember my initial perception of him when I first arrived as a reporter for the BBC in Indonesia in early 1987.

Framed portraits that hung in every office up and down the archipelago showed a somewhat stern looking man with strong eyes. In real life, the most common image of Suharto in the last decade of his long rule was that of a rotund man with slightly long, slicked-back grey hair, wearing a drab grey safari suit. A tiny Garuda bird lapel badge was the only symbol denoting his official status. "Pak Harto," as the President of the Republic was popularly known, assiduously cultivated his image of benign authority. He kept strict office hours and except for once being filmed riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle, was never ostentatious in public. He was mostly seen on television or in newspapers greeting guests, his head tilted regally down, extending a limp hand at a slightly raised trajectory, so that whoever shook it approached in an attitude of submission from below. There was nothing in these images to betray the steely resolve or flashes of anger that lurked in his brown eyes. For millions of Indonesians, Suharto was, as the



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title of an early biography of him published in 1969 by O.G. Roeder, an obscure German writer, declared “The Smiling General.”

There were rare insights into the personality behind the mask. These were mostly revealed during unplanned, unforeseen events that were beyond his calculating grasp. Suharto, an innately superstitious Javanese, considered time - its control and manipulation - a critical factor in the management of power. “To make the right decisions, one must act at the right time,” ran one of the Javanese proverbs attributed to him by his children in a book they produced in the 1980s. Or, as Roeder put it: “His rise to leadership was mainly the result of prevailing conditions and events. His actions were mainly reactions...” So when Suharto was caught off guard by sudden events for which he had no time to reflect on or plan, these brief moments opened a window on his otherwise heavily guarded personality.

Perhaps the most revealing of these unplanned moments I ever witnessed was at the funeral of the late Sultan of Jogjakarta, Hamengkubuwono IX, in October 1988. The charming old Sultan had died of a heart attack in Washington DC. His body was flown back to Jakarta where he lay in state for a few days in his townhouse in Menteng Raya, a central Jakarta district. I recall the feverish anticipation among the Jakarta elite: would Suharto go and pay respects? The basis of this speculation was that the deceased feudal aristocrat’s wisdom and popularity outshone that of the son of a Javanese peasant farmer who had inexplicably made it to the top.

In Suharto’s efficiently repressive state, it was nearly impossible to express dissent, so dissidents sought refuge in symbolism. One of Suharto’s fiercest critics, and a close friend of the Sultan’s from the days of the revolutionary struggle against the Dutch, was retired General Abdul Haris Nasution. The elderly general had positioned himself at one end of the room where the Sultan’s body lay in state. By this means, all who came to pay their respects to the Sultan would also have to greet Nasution. One of the generals targeted by unknown assassins in the mysterious putsch of September 30th 1965 that brought Suharto to power, Nasution miraculously escaped over a garden wall when the soldiers came to get him at home. There was a look of triumph on the frail general’s face as people filed past him after paying respects to the Sultan. It was Nasution who had ordered Suharto in the 1960s to relinquish his central Java command under suspicion of corruption. It was the Sultan who once asked of Suharto: “Is he still in the habit of stealing?”

Speculation about Suharto’s discomfort mounted once the Sultan’s body was moved a day or so later to his stuccoed low-rise palace in Jogjakarta. The funeral was to be a grand affair, involving a procession to the royal graves at Imogiri a few kilometers outside the city. A sea of ordinary people pressed up against the palace gates to bid farewell to their benevolent old ruler, a man who had combined the mystical authority of a feudal lord with a secular, fun-loving outlook on life, urbane Western manners, and perhaps

most important of all, a leading role in the struggle for the Republic. His was an enigmatic life, like Suharto's, but with no hint of corruption, it was beyond reproach. On the day of the funeral itself more than three million people lined the road to the burial site.

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sat a large group of mostly elderly women — the late Sultan's concubines.

Finally, Suharto arrived; oddly, he was dressed in a dark suit and a black velvet cap (I later learned that since he had been conferred with no noble title, nor — contrary to rumor — was he related in any way to the long palace lineage, he was therefore not entitled to wear Javanese



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south coast of Java and who had no real political power was seen by many Indonesians as an unbearable slight for Suharto, who styled himself the father of his nation's development and maintained control over every aspect of the country. On the day of the funeral, rumors swept the town that Suharto might not show up. The entire cabinet had already trooped past the coffin as it lay under a glittering pavilion in the palace grounds. Javanese nobility bustled to and fro on the polished marble floor in elegant leather slippers, dressed in their finest batik, be-jeweled and perfumed *keris* daggers slipped into a waistband in the small of their backs. They bowed and murmured in whispers before the corpse of the Sultan. In an adjoining pavilion, almost unseen

courtly dress). The President's normally smooth and radiant face was pinched, stony and grey. For those accustomed to the smiling mask, this was a different face. The eyes were downcast and dull. Was it grief, we all wondered, or was it something else? Was it a realization that after all the years of careful nurturing and manipulation, he wasn't after all the true object of his people's admiration? He wasn't even recognized as a member of the nobility.

A year later in 1989, Suharto was on a plane returning from an overseas trip. It was customary for the President to give an informal briefing to the traveling Indonesian press corps on the way home. Reporters crowded around him, holding out microphones and tape recorders in meek

media submission. Suharto droned on about the non-aligned movement and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), nodding every so often to emphasize a point made in heavily Javanese-accented Indonesian. As part of this boilerplate account of Indonesia's position in the world, Suharto emphasized that it wasn't ambition that explained his chairmanship of the non-aligned movement, but the need to save the movement from being taken over by radical socialist states. "This you must all understand." Although Suharto was never one to revel in the intricacies of global affairs, he nonetheless liked to bask in the international limelight.

Suddenly, and without warning at the end of his monologue, Suharto's eyes flashed and his grin grew wider and almost maniacal. "People don't read, they don't know — no, it's not that they don't know, they simply don't understand unless it comes from my own mouth." The President grew more agitated as he complained about how people no longer trusted his ministers and kept demanding more openness. Everything was on his shoulders, and perhaps he would soon drop dead. "Perhaps that's what some people want," he ranted. "That's easy to do. I can be replaced at any time by constitutional means." Here he slipped into coarser language, saying: "But anyone who uses extra legal means, I will clobber them... whether a politician or a general, they will be clobbered."

The effect of these words, in particular the Indonesian word "*gebug*," to clobber, was electrifying on a public accustomed to Suharto's phlegmatic and affable manner. For the chattering classes, these remarks confirmed something everyone suspected — that Suharto sensed a challenge. The same year Suharto's otherwise smooth re-election was marred by a minor interruption in the rubber stamp assembly; a little known army officer rushed to the podium in an apparent bid to object to Suharto's candidacy. Outside the building a grinning armed forces commander, General L.B. Murdani, could barely contain his impatience. He smoked one cigarette after another and spoke nervously through clenched teeth. We all knew his position. Over

quiet lunches and dinners this Christian general with a pockmarked craggy face and gentle eyes made his feelings plain. The old man, as he referred to Suharto, was losing his grip on reality. The children were out of control, and no one could convince him to do anything about them. Within a few months of Suharto's re-election, Murdani was dismissed as armed forces chief.

The following year, in a courageous speech, Murdani — who was not asked to fall on his sword, but typical of the way Suharto handled such situations, was retained as the less powerful defense minister - captured the prevailing political atmosphere well. "People in general do not like change and are therefore inclined to maintain the status-quo," Murdani said, in his straightforward way. "Although in the context of history, continuity serves as a bridge between the past and the present and future, continuity also tends to impede the process of advancement, particularly when continuity itself is showing towards decline."

It took another eight years of slow decline before Suharto was finally forced from power. Who really cared about political reform when the economy was booming and people grew rich? By the end of 1989, there were so many new private banks that they had started to take curious names like Andromeda — as mythical as their balance sheets. Some people grew very rich indeed, and that was part of the problem. The country's central bank was asked to bail out Suharto's family members when they incurred heavy debts on the back of dubious corporate dealings. One such deal involved the acquisition of the famous Italian sports car maker, Lamborghini. The problem that Murdani had identified and tried to bring to Suharto's attention, a weakness for his own family, undermined the real economic achievements of his long rule and set the stage for his downfall.



When the day finally came in May 1998, I was having breakfast in the Sari Pan Pacific Hotel in downtown Jakarta when the television station

switched to a live feed from the white stucco Presidential Palace that once housed the Dutch Governor General. Waiters and waitresses stopped serving coffee and clearing plates and quietly, very calmly, huddled around the screen as Suharto started to read his prepared statement. Once again, as at the Sultan's funeral a decade earlier, the face was stony and his guard was down. He wore spectacles and looked tired and disheveled. He spoke briefly, reading from a piece of paper. It was over in a matter of minutes. Then, after staring blankly into the camera, Suharto went home and stayed there, like some retired functionary tending to his garden and talking to his birds.

It would be comforting to believe that the decade Suharto spent in virtual isolation at his Jakarta home after his fall was justice of sorts for a man who allowed the country to descend into violence and ruin because he could not bring himself to let a little light into the system. But instead, the ailing Suharto commanded strong loyalty and respect from the majority of people who now lead the country — many of whom rushed to his bedside each time he was hospitalized because they owe their wealth and position to his patronage. There was a quiet complicity among the Jakarta elite; many of the people I first knew as Suharto functionaries were now respected members of the new Democratic Order. I still recall an interview I did with a much younger Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in his capacity as head of social and political affairs at Indonesian Armed Forces Headquarters. The year was 1990 and it was Susilo's job to defend the military's dual role in political as well as military affairs. When I suggested that the military's role in politics ran contrary to global trends, the fresh-faced general started drawing concentric circles on a white board suggesting that Indonesians had a different set of mental maps. If you had asked me then to guess who would become a popularly elected democratic chief executive, I would scarcely have believed it could be an army general. I would never have believed it would be Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Right at the end, the hold Suharto had over people seemed undiminished as ministers,

heads of state and former presidents and prime ministers gathered at his bedside as he lay dying. I called a friend in Jakarta, Felia Salim. "I have this strange and uncomfortable feeling," she said. "What is it?" I asked. "I don't know," she said. "I won't know until he is gone." Another friend, her name is Lisa, sent me an email the day after Suharto's state funeral in central Java. "We grew up under Pak Harto's regime and we have special memories about him," this bright young business executive, who was born in the late 1970s, wrote. "We often went to the Merdeka Palace on... Independence Day. We sang the Indonesian anthem together with students from other schools from all over Jakarta. We were very proud since after that if we're lucky we can shake hands with the president or first lady. Now I feel that all this indoctrination makes me appreciate my country... I'm quite surprised that most of my colleagues were in tears when we watched the funeral procession on TV and many of them told of the same memories of how Pak Harto influenced their national perspective, and we all agreed that today's younger generation is less nationalistic and appreciates the country less." What is so striking about this recollection is that Lisa is a member of Indonesia's "Generation X"; she is smart, young and has a brighter, more democratic future before her than Indonesians who are in their 40s and 50s and whose careers were stunted or stymied by the lack of openness in the Suharto era.

Now that he is dead, much of the foreign commentary has focused on Suharto's misdeeds; the bloody repression of the Indonesian Communist Party that cost upwards of half a million lives; the imprisonment of thousands of the regime's critics; the ruthless murder of petty crooks and then the invasion of East Timor. Most Indonesians remain remarkably silent on these unpardonable events from the country's not so distant past. Perhaps they recall their own role in them; how ordinary Indonesians fell upon each other in ferocious bouts of blood-letting after 1965, for example. In intellectual circles there was the silent shunning of protest



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that marked the prosperous years spanning the 1980s and 90s. Many friends my own age benefited from this prosperity with overseas educations and well-paid jobs in the corporate sector. They sometimes complained about the lack of openness, but very few put their livelihoods at risk. One of the great advantages of Suharto's masked personality in political terms was that you could live for weeks, even months, and not really sense his overarching presence. "Suharto is a blank", one angry student once told me. I recall once seeing his effigy burned at a student protest in 1989. The face on the hastily made cardboard and paper effigy was blank. Perhaps Roeder is right, in his little-appreciated early biography, which was based on meetings with the man: Suharto reacted to prevailing conditions. The political scientist and former assembly speaker Amien Rais, who led mass protests against Suharto in 1998 that helped bring Suharto down, perhaps put it more elo-

quently: "I just want to remind ourselves that a country's leadership is a reflection of its people — Pak Harto held power for 32 years because we, as a nation, made it possible."

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