



ABDURRAHMAN WAHID

MUSLIM DEMOCRAT, INDONESIAN PRESIDENT

GREG BARTON

*a view
from the
inside*

UNSW
PRESS

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INDONESIAN PRESIDENT

GREG BARTON is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria. Since the late 1980s he has researched the influence of Islamic liberalism in Indonesia and its contribution to the development of civil society and democracy. One of the central figures in his research has been Abdurrahman Wahid, whom Barton has come to know better than perhaps any other researcher.

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A view from the inside

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**UNSW
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For
Siew Mee and Hannah
and
in memory of Herb Feith

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PREFACE



Few biographers like to imagine that their own subject is anything less than unusual and interesting. I certainly feel the same way about the focus of this biography for the most subjective of reasons, but I also believe that there are objective reasons for regarding Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur as he is known affectionately by tens of millions, as representing a most remarkable subject. I am also well aware that I have written a rather unusual biography.

By the conventions of the genre, a serious biography is generally hammered out in long sessions examining archives or interviewing dozens of people who knew the subject, all of which is documented in extensive footnotes. The approach that I have taken is somewhat different, for while this biography does benefit from extensive reading and research and from numerous interviews with a wide range of individuals, it deliberately focuses on the subject's own account. The reason is simple: I had a unique opportunity to observe and interact with Abdurrahman during a critical period of his life and was therefore in a position to give a firsthand account. I was privileged to be given remarkable access to Abdurrahman throughout his political campaign after the fall of Suharto and throughout his presidency; I spent hundreds of hours with him during this period, having already come to know him very well since first meeting him in the late 1980s. During

his 21-month presidency I spent about seven months as his guest, rising most mornings at 4.30 am to spend the first three hours of the day with him. I was also able to travel with him around Indonesia, and occasionally abroad, and observe him at work as president.

It seemed to me that, because both Abdurrahman and his world of traditionalist Islam are frequently misunderstood, even within Indonesia, an account that attempted to understand the man and his world empathetically from his point of view would have significant value, especially if it drew on firsthand observation.

This does not mean that the approach I have taken is uncritical. On the contrary, I have wrestled with this material over many years and in the later chapters in particular this has led me to make a series of critical observations. This is made easier for me because the bulk of this book focuses on the period since I have come to know Abdurrahman and was able to observe many of the key developments described here. What this means, of course, is that this is a very personal and subjective account. This is both its strength and its weakness, but in this it is not so different from other biographies as might first appear. All biographies are essentially interpretations of an individual's life, and none is entirely objective in an absolute sense. Some benefit from decades — even centuries — of critical distance and vast bodies of earlier scholarship; others from direct access to more immediate sources. There are advantages and disadvantages with each. Consequently, although I believe that it is important that future biographers of Abdurrahman Wahid draw on material other than what I have used here, I don't believe that the approach taken here is any less valid.

Another defining characteristic of this account is that it is deliberately written to be accessible to as broad a readership as possible. As a professional academic I have found it the most challenging piece of writing that I have ever undertaken. I have spent years wrestling with trying to understand Abdurrahman and attempting to establish a coherent interpretation, so far as it is possible, of his convictions and behaviour. It seemed to me that there was little benefit in burdening the reader with an account of my struggles. Instead, I have tried to present the results of my research as straightforwardly as possible while also tying my reading of events into what I hope is a reasonably vivid narrative account.

I owe a great debt to many people with whom I have talked about Abdurrahman over the years; only a small number of them are mentioned

by name in the acknowledgements that follow. Many of these conversations took the form of formal interviews, a number of which were recorded; others took the form of conversations of a kind that it did not seem appropriate to record. Indeed many of these conversations were so intimate that even to refer to them in footnotes was not appropriate. In recent years I have often had opportunity to meet with government ministers, religious leaders, intellectuals, activists, military generals, and other members of the Indonesian elite and have enjoyed many fruitful conversations. Few of these are referred to directly in this volume but all of them contributed, in some way or other, to my understanding of events. I have also been in the fortunate position of being able to accompany Abdurrahman and witness many of the events described here. Frequently I have found my observations of what I saw are at variance with contemporary accounts in the media. This does not mean, of course, that my recollection of events is always correct, or that it is always superior to media accounts. I have gained valuable insight both from reading accounts in the press and also from speaking directly with journalists. Nevertheless, I have oriented my account very much to what I have observed, in the hope that it communicates something to the reader that a secondhand account cannot do.

During the process of researching this volume I have experienced tremendous emotional pressure. I have seen Abdurrahman's strengths and weaknesses as few outside his immediate family have done. I have experienced extreme frustration and despair when he has made grave mistakes, as often happened during his presidency, and I have also seen something of the vision that drives him on. He has been a remarkably generous friend and has opened himself to me in a way in which few people would to a biographer. And while this account draws heavily, and therefore depends greatly, on firsthand observation and Abdurrahman's own recollections, there is no sense in which I have been directed to write anything at all. At no point has he, or anyone around him, attempted to influence what I was writing. Naturally, this degree of trust, combined with my own sense of what is fair and ethical, has left me with a sense of where it is reasonable for this biography to go. There are certain areas that, it seemed to me, because of their personal nature, that I had no good reason to investigate in this book at this time. There were other matters, such as the affairs of Abdurrahman's party, PKB, that I felt to be beyond the scope of this study, important though they no doubt are — this book is already too long as it is.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



There are many people who have helped in the writing of this book but only some can be named here. Whether named or unnamed, I am deeply grateful to the multitude of people whose friendship, hospitality, advice and help I have experienced over the years.

The person to whom I owe the single greatest debt of gratitude is my wife, Siew Mee. She has patiently encouraged and endured not only during the years that went directly into the making of this book but also in the decade that came before, during which I undertook the research that forms the foundation of this book. I am deeply grateful, too, to our daughter, Hannah, for her stoic acceptance of the demands that my ongoing research has placed upon our family. Hannah's earliest memories include a seemingly endless series of rushed goodbyes in the middle of the night as I once again sped off to Jakarta, leaving her for weeks at a time. For years on end, all that she and Siew Mee knew of family holidays was joining me for whatever left over pieces of time they could grab during inter-semester fieldwork trips to Java. Even when I was physically at home with them, my mind was often elsewhere or I was locked in the study, making them as much as me prisoners of the demands of my chosen career. Consequently, it is no polite exaggeration to say that this book would not have been possible without their patient forbearance and generous sacrifice.

I am also deeply grateful to my parents, Jim and Edie Barton, whose support went well beyond kindly words of encouragement and finally became for me an affirmation that I really did have something worthwhile to contribute.

Alongside my own nuclear and extended family there is another family that has patiently bore my often unreasonable demands and repaid them with friendship and understanding and the gracious inclusion of me into their world and their lives. I am deeply thankful to Abdurrahman and Nuriyah and to their daughters Alissa, Yenny, Anita and Inayah. For years, Abdurrahman has responded to my clumsy probing into his personal affairs with patience and generous friendship. And Yenny, in particular, has gone out of her way more times than I can now remember to see that I had the access that I needed. That this continued unchanged even during the difficult months of his presidency is something that I still find remarkable. I also find it remarkable, and feel compelled to note it here, that at no time did Abdurrahman or Yenny or anyone else in the Wahid family ever try, directly or indirectly, to influence my account. Instead, they simply extended to me unfettered access and genuine friendship. To say that I could not ask for more helpful and trusting subjects falls well short of the mark — I could not ask for better friends.

There are many other friends in Indonesia, more than I can list here, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude to for their help, encouragement and friendship over the years. They include Munib Huda, Ratih Hardjono, Djohan Effendi, Mohamed Sobary, Henry and Martha Tong, Andy and Diena Trigg and Greg and Sarah Moriarty. I am also grateful for the professional help of Rohim Ghazali, Ahmad Suaedy and friends from Paramadina, NU and elsewhere who have helped me with my research over many years. In more recent times I have been extraordinarily helped and encouraged by friends such as Wimar Witoelar, Mark Hanusz and Dian Wirjawan and I am deeply grateful to them for their advice and understanding help.

Back in Australia, I am very grateful for the encouragement and support of many people who believed in me when my own confidence had long begun to waver. I particularly wish to thank Peter Browne, formerly from UNSW Press, for his wise counsel, his enormously helpful feedback and his unfailing encouragement. I am grateful too, to Janet Mackenzie for skillfully helping turn my prolix prose into something a little easier to read and to Felicity Raeburn and Edie Barton for their patient help with developing and refining my manuscript.

I also owe special debt of gratitude to Greg Fealy, Hamish MacDonald and Ed Aspinall for their careful work in pointing out the many flaws in my manuscript and their fearless advice to me. This book would be very much poorer without their contribution and I am grateful to them for saving me from going to print with a multitude of gaffs and mistakes. No doubt there will still be many things about this book with which they will take issue, some arising from difference in academic opinion and some from the limitations arising from this book's scope and focus; such is the nature of academic books, especially biographies. I am deeply appreciative of their patient scholarship and all that they have done to try and help me and this account. Needless to say, however, I take full responsibility for all errors, flaws and failings within this book.

This book was largely written in 2000, with several final chapters being added in 2001. The research, however, began in earnest in 1997 and over the past five years I have made numerous field trips to Indonesia which have directly and indirectly contributed to this book. This broader research would not have been possible without the support of the Australian Research Council (ARC) and my employer, Deakin University. I received two three-year research grants from the ARC to study 'The influence of Islamic liberalism' and 'Islam and civil society in Indonesia', and this book represents one of the direct outcomes of those research projects. I am also very grateful to Deakin University, and the Faculty of Arts and the School of Social Inquiry within it, for the understanding and flexibility that has been extended to me, allowing me to spend months each year away from campus on field work. I am particularly appreciative of the Dean's publication support scheme which made it possible for me to spend the first half of 2000 focusing almost exclusively on hammering out a manuscript.

I am also grateful for the permission from several parties for me to use material in this book. I thank the photographers at the Presidential Palace, Antara news agency, *Kompas* newspaper and the Wahid family for the use of some of their photographs. I also thank the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* for allowing me to use in the epilogue material that I earlier wrote for publication in their pages on 28 July 2001. Similarly, I am also thankful to Carfax Publishing for allowing me to use a revised version of an article I wrote for *Pacifica Review* (Vol. 13, No. 3, October 2001) in the conclusion of this book.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the tireless, anonymous angel who

runs the Joyo news service, without whose hourly deliveries to my 'Inbox' I would have been so much less well informed.

One of the somewhat unexpected pleasures of researching, writing about, and venturing to comment on contemporary developments in Indonesia has been the support and encouragement that I have received from colleagues. I am particularly grateful for the support that I have received from my colleagues in the Religious Studies/Comparative Studies program at Deakin — Ian Weeks, Barry Butcher and Peter Fenner. Not only have they covered for me when, often at short notice, I have had to make a trip to Indonesia during the semester, they have been unfailingly encouraging, as have Bryan Turner and Sue Kenny and many other colleagues at Deakin.

Outside my own university, I am thankful for the advice, assistance and friendship I have received from fellow Indonesianists and scholars of Islam, such as Robert Hefner, Arief Budiman, Abdullah Saeed, Andree Feillard, Martin van Bruinessen and Johan Meuleman. Each in their own way has significantly shaped my thinking about the issues covered in this book. A less direct, but still significant influence has come from other Indonesianists, especially those at Monash University, such as Barbara Hatley, Cyril Skinner, Paul Tickell, David Hill, John Legge, Merle Ricklefs and Herb Feith.

The sad news of Herb's untimely death on 15 November 2001 came just as I was preparing these comments. I cannot claim that Herb's scholarship shaped my own in any direct manner that I can easily delineate. I can say, however, that his very personality had an influence on me and many other scholars of Indonesia that was as profound as it was subtle. Herb was the model for us all of passionate, concerned, engaged scholarship. He was a *mensch*, an intellectual not afraid of actively engaging with his subject and with society. Only now am I aware of just how much he influenced me and this book. Thank you Herb. *Selamat jalan.*