

Obituary

SOEDJATMOKO (1922–1989)

Dr. Soedjatmoko—Koko to all who knew him—died at the age of sixty-seven on December 21, 1989, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He was among friends and colleagues at a university seminar on Indonesia's development, in apparent good health, when he was stricken by a sudden massive heart attack. His death has brought an outpouring of personal and political commentaries in the Indonesian press although it was little noticed in the United States, perhaps because his country has dropped beyond the horizon of America's constricted interest in the Pacific Rim.

Soedjatmoko was, at different times in his life, a nationalist revolutionary, a journalist, a publisher, a scholar, a diplomat, an international educator—in other words, “a man of parts” in the old-fashioned sense of the term—a man who knew a lot and did a lot about many different things. He was an Asian counterpart of those dissident European intellectuals who are the voice of reason—the voice of the Enlightenment—in a world that too seldom has listened to such voices. In a world where many in the West still believe that being a Muslim means being an extremist, Soedjatmoko combined his deepening faith in Islam with a profound global concern for freedom and human rights that was part of what he often called his “dual cultural consciousness.” And in a world where “socialism” is often used as a dirty word, Soedjatmoko was not afraid to think and act as a democratic socialist, even though his party (the PSI, Partai Sosialis Indonesia) had been banned in Indonesia since 1961.

It is hard to sum up what he meant to so many of us, in Indonesia and the rest of the world, for his importance was rooted in the way he paid attention to the individual human being in the communication of ideas. He had a special quality of generosity that demanded full attention: one was made to think for oneself in any dialogue with him and it never mattered who had contributed which idea—it was always a reciprocity between equals, no matter who spoke. For many of us who worked as scholars in Indonesia, conversations with Koko were invaluable: they decisively shaped our view of his nation, its culture, politics, and history and often alerted us to subtle traditional elements in the worldview of at least some of his contemporaries.

In his later years—when he was no longer being heard by some of the people in power at home, when his party remained banned and many of its members, including himself, were harassed, questioned, and falsely accused about their supposed role in student demonstrations in 1973–74—Koko became an increasingly important participant in global dialogues. He sat on international policy commissions on education, disarmament, development, philanthropy, architecture, and the environment, lectured tirelessly at schools and universities around the world, and served on the boards of many organizations. He was the first non-Western trustee of the Ford Foundation. But he was not always free to travel: In 1974, for example, he was invited to testify on human rights before the U.S. Congress but was prevented from leaving Indonesia. In 1978, he received the Ramon Magsaysay Award,

Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, for his "positive commitment [to] forthright expression," yet his influence at home remained muted.

His connection with the United Nations dated back to his membership in the delegation that sought U.N. recognition for independent Indonesia (1947–50) and lasted to his service as Rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo (1980–87). From 1968 to 1971, he was Indonesia's Ambassador to the United States. In all of these positions, he placed his intellectual, scholarly concerns above all else, affecting the context in which all of us work in the world today.

He entered public life while still a student and was an active participant in Indonesia's nationalist revolution. On his return to Indonesia from his work at the United Nations and a year's study at Harvard's Littauer School of Public Administration in the early 1950s, he worked primarily as a journalist (editor of the daily *Pedoman* and the weekly *Siasat*) and publisher (*Pembangunan* Publishing). He was also an active member of the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) but the party was banned by President Sukarno in 1961, as his regime came more and more under the influence of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Until 1963, when he could no longer write openly, Soedjatmoko spoke out vigorously in favor of the right to free expression. His firm published a translation of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, a step for which he was viciously attacked by the PKI because of the novel's reputation as an effective protest against an authoritarian government. Koko's published review of the book influenced other Indonesian intellectuals, many of whom later signed a manifesto protesting against pressures to conform to "socialist realism;" most lost their jobs as a result and could no longer publish.

Soedjatmoko came to Cornell University in 1961 for one year as a Visiting Lecturer in History. During this period, his work on Indonesian history and historiography, begun several years earlier, was made more widely available to English-speaking audiences through the publication of a major edited volume, *An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography* (Cornell 1965), and the translation of his 1957 essay, *An Approach to Indonesian History: Towards an Open Future* (Cornell Translation Series 1960). In the early 1960s, Soedjatmoko also wrote a prescient organizing statement for an international conference in Manila on modernization and development in South and Southeast Asia. The conference volume, *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (Free Press 1965), edited by Robert N. Bellah, contains Soedjatmoko's important essay which argues that "the developmental process itself is not a self-justifying proposition" (1965:2). Soedjatmoko wanted to focus attention rather on changes that brought about personal and national crises of identity. But although a national sense of identity was vital, he argued that it did not arise from "self-examination [but] is defined and constantly redefined in the continuous flow of actions and choices in response to problems" (1965:4). He did not think much of artificial attempts to develop a sense of national identity, either then or later.

His 1967 Dyason Memorial Lectures in Australia raise several crucial themes that remain central to modern Indonesia. In a typical passage, Soedjatmoko summarized some of his own deepest convictions about his nation's history:

"The jump from the a-historical *Weltanschauung* of traditional agrarian society, with its chiliastic yearnings for the perfect society, to the closed and self-contained system of thought and the vision of the perfect state of Marxism is apparently a smaller one than the jump to the concept of an open future and the acceptance of the Imperfect State as part of the human condition. It is much more difficult to feel attracted to the insecurity of freedom than to the historical inevitability of a perfect world order from which comfort and strength can be drawn" (*Australian Outlook*, December 1967:288–89).

In the more than twenty years since he wrote these words, this idea remained among his most constant themes: the importance of taking risks with new approaches and the crucial role that intellectuals and educators must play in keeping the door open to new ideas in all societies. In a speech at Milton Academy near Boston a few years ago, for example, he reaffirmed the global responsibility of American universities for taking the risks inherent in encouraging new and creative ideas, risks that not enough universities were willing to take in other parts of the world, including his own. And in our last conversations with him, a short time before his death, we shared his excitement about the remarkable opening of many closed societies and his deep sadness that some had closed themselves off again. We will miss him.

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