Gus Dur's secret night life
By GEORGE QUINN

ABDURRAHMAN WAHID, President of Indonesia, sits cross-legged on the tiled floor, his feet bare, his head bowed, his hands resting palms-up on his knees. He is at the tomb of a long-dead Muslim saint. The air is heavy with the stinging, sweet scent of burnt resin and rose oil. The president leans forward towards the white lace canopy hanging over the tombstone. His lips move in silent prayer. Tears flow from his blind eyes, glistening on his cheeks in the half-light of late night.

Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur as he is popularly known, has a little-known, almost secret nocturnal life. He is a frequent visitor to the innumerable tombs of Java's Muslim saints and pious clerics. These visits usually take place at night and often occur on the spur of the moment. Not infrequently they upset or mystify fellow politicians.

Just last week, for example, Gus Dur suddenly decided to visit the tomb of Haji Muhammad Barokah, a revered figure in the Muslim community around the small town of Kroya in central Java. Unexpectedly shunning a Cabinet meeting, leaving a roomful of ministers high and dry and exasperating his vice-president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, he left Jakarta by private train in the middle of the day, arriving in Kroya just after nightfall.

He made his way immediately to Haji Barokah's tomb where he spent just 15 minutes at the graveside. He prayed for the repose of the Haji's soul and, according to reports, also made a silent plea for the salvation of the Indonesian nation. By nine o'clock he was back in his train heading home to Jakarta where he arrived at three in the morning.

Gus Dur's many lightning pilgrimages are little reported in the foreign press. Even in Indonesia it is his battles with a hostile parliament, with secessionist movements and a recalcitrant economy that hog the headlines. Even so, there is plenty of evidence, disturbing to some and reassuring to others, that late-night pilgrimage plays a significant role in stiffening the beleaguered president's morale and political resolve.

Shortly after taking office, and already suffering the slings and arrows of Indonesia's turbulent political life, Gus Dur told journalists that he had recently visited the tomb of the great saint Sunan Kalijaga in Demak, central Java. Sunan Kalijaga died between 400 and 500 years ago.

Alone in Sunan Kalijaga's burial chamber Gus Dur says he heard the saint speak to him from the tomb, exhorting him to have no fear. He claims the saint spoke words of comfort to him and gave him a special, powerful sentence from the Holy Qur'an which, the saint said, he should recite every day. "God is with those that steadfastly persevere."

Prayed at the tomb of Muhammad

Earlier this year, in the midst of a political crisis and under intense pressure to step aside, Gus Dur made a pilgrimage to the Islamic holy land in Saudi Arabia. Flanked by a cohort of Cabinet ministers, aides and Muslim clerics, he prayed at the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, shedding tears as he did so.

In Islamic tradition the Prophet's tomb is known as a place where, God willing, all prayers are answered. As he stepped off the plane on his return to Jakarta, reporters noted his renewed energy, one remarking that he appeared to have had an "injection of fresh blood".

Pilgrimages indeed appear to recharge Gus Dur. But in some quarters they are also controversial. Many suspect that Gus Dur, who is blind and vulnerable to poor advice, visits the tombs of saints for much more than spiritual respite and rejuvenation. Visiting tombs may be a weapon he uses in playing Jakarta's game of politics.

His visit to Haji Barokah's tomb, for example, when he should have been chairing a Cabinet meeting, may have been part of a strategy to wrong-foot his political rivals, particularly Megawati. He also feels a deep
need, some say, to consult a "higher authority" for guidance on policy matters, even pleading for enlightenment that will help him make particular decisions.

Last year, for example, while mulling over the possible sacking of two Cabinet ministers, Gus Dur visited the eastern Java city of Surabaya. According to a report in the usually reliable news magazine Tempo, someone told the president that a long-dead cleric had appeared to him in a dream complaining that the president had never visited his tomb. The cleric had been a legendary stalwart of Nahdlatul Ulama, the sprawling Islamic organisation which is Gus Dur's main power base. Gus Dur instantly mobilised three helicopters and headed 200km east to the sleepy town of Situbondo where the tomb is located.

According to Tempo, Gus Dur paid his respects at the tomb and emerged not only spiritually refreshed but with renewed political resolve. Without further hesitation, and without consulting his vice-president or anyone else, he ejected the two ministers from office. At a later press conference he bumbled his way through a rationalisation of the sackings.

In a wry aside a government insider commented "Don't waste your time trying to see logic in President Abdurrahman Wahid's Cabinet changes. You can put forward a million clever explanations, but the president's controversial decisions 'come from the sky' and that is the bottom line."

The president's liking for pilgrimage is shared by many of his supporters. Some are convinced that he is himself a saint and a close companion of the powerful dead. His blindness, they believe, gives him a truer vision of what is right and feasible for Indonesia's future. There are stories of miraculous "signs", stories that are taken up and enthusiastically embellished by his followers.

One cleric who was with Gus Dur in Medina earlier this year claims that he saw a vision of the president seated unperturbed on a comfortable chair while others struggled in vain to remove him from it. The back of the chair was inscribed with the famous Throne verse from the Holy Qur'an (Al-Baqarah 255), a superbly powerful and poetic evocation of the qualities of God.

These stories are given wide credence, especially in rural Java. But there are also many Muslims, particularly those aligned with the modernist Muhammadiyah movement, who greet them with scepticism, scorn and even embarrassment.

It is superstition plain and simple, say some. Other more cynical observers say that Gus Dur's pilgrimages and their associated stories are creations of image-makers and that the president is huffing and puffing on a treadmill of populist myth-making in a futile attempt to salvage his presidency. Still others deplore the reappearance of mystical mumbo-jumbo in the supposedly reformist post-Soeharto era. To rely on mystical revelation, they say, is to undermine democracy, openness and rational governance.

Gus Dur is now facing the most difficult test of a difficult presidency. A windswept sea of enemies is steadily rising around him. One thing beyond doubt in the current crisis is that Gus Dur's deep faith will not allow him to capitulate without a fight.

As he struggles to see what is going on through his blindness he will likely find strength in another special verse from the Holy Qur'an entrusted to him late at night in the silence of Sunan Kalijaga's tomb: "How often, by God's will, has a small force vanquished a big one."

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