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SUHARTO: THE END OF AN ASEAN ERA

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The passing of former president Suharto on Sunday 27 January 2008 brings to a close the most important chapter in the political history of Southeast Asia -- and of the founding generation of ASEAN leaders. The successor generation faces the challenge of continuing their legacies amid changing expectations.

THE WORSENING medical condition of his predecessor Suharto had forced Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to cut short his talks in Malaysia with Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi earlier in January.

Not long after, Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew flew to Jakarta to visit the ailing 86-year-old Suharto, who Mr Lee clearly still holds in high esteem and fondly remembers as a close friend. Within a day, another aging ASEAN stalwart, Mahathir Mohamad, did likewise. He even offered prayers for the man many Indonesians still call respectfully as "Pak Harto", using the honorific reference to "father" or "uncle".

The passing of a generation

Mr Lee, 84, and Dr Mahathir, 82, were paying what they knew would be their final respects to a former comrade-in-power fighting for his life. As a moment of poignant grief, it was pregnant with symbolism. The curtain was drawing on a key actor on the regional stage. Mr Suharto finally succumbed to his illness and died on Sunday 27 January 2008. With that came to a close a significant chapter in regional history. The death of Mr Suharto, the most senior of the three ASEAN octogenarians, marks the ending of a defining generation of leaders of the region.

Mr Suharto's final hours have been as divisive as his last years in power, which culminated in his downfall in 1998. Indonesians who respect him for developing Indonesia feel sad that he is dying. Those who suffered under his strong-armed rule and accused him of plunder as well as power and human rights abuse are disappointed with their failure to drag him to trial. But there is no doubt that Mr Lee and Dr Mahathir have grown to respect Mr Suharto for what he had achieved under trying circumstances. Together, the three former heads of government had dominated the regional stage for

so long that they not only laid the groundwork for ASEAN's economic transformation but also played a major part in shaping its political ethos.

It should come as no surprise that Mr Lee and Dr Mahathir have also developed a certain bond with Mr Suharto. The manner in which the Indonesian strongman has been treated by his people since his exit must have saddened, if not hurt, the two regional figures. Notice the moist in Mr Lee's eyes as he spoke to the Singapore media later about the fate of Mr Suharto. Just as touching was the quiet moment between Dr Mahathir and Mr Suharto, during the rare period when the former Indonesian president was conscious. According to a daughter of Mr Suharto, Dr Mahathir and Mr Suharto shed tears, together. Yes, strong men do cry. Even those who were once in power, and feared because of it.

The subdued pathos

What can we make of this moment of pathos? Dr Mahathir disclosed nothing of his inner thoughts. If there could be any clue, it came in clear and no uncertain terms from Mr Lee in his pre-departure session with the media. In his usual straight-talking style, Mr Lee said Mr Suharto has not been given the due recognition he deserved. His contribution to Indonesia was too enormous to be forgotten, or to be trifled with. Yet, Mr Lee left hints of his deep regret that the younger generation of Indonesians has been too harsh, if not ungrateful, to the man who, on balance, brought far more good than harm.

Mr Lee's comparison of Mr Suharto and Mr Ne Win of Burma in the early 1960s was stark but drove home his point. Had Mr Suharto followed Mr Ne Win's road to socialism and style of governance, Indonesia would be just like Myanmar today, ASEAN would not have come into existence, and Southeast Asia might have ended up in a mess, if not a warring zone.

End of an ASEAN era

Until Mr Suharto's death, he and Mr Lee were the only two surviving founding leaders of ASEAN. Now, Mr Lee is the only one left from that generation, although Dr Mahathir came to the scene much later. Mr Suharto, Mr Lee and Dr Mahathir shared several common characteristics: All three lasted very long in office as chief executive – from Dr Mahathir's 22 years (1981 to 2003) to Mr Suharto's 32 (1966 to 1998) and Mr Lee's 39 (1959 till 1990). They are of a similar age and come from a generation whose formative experiences were during the Japanese wartime occupation and the post-war quest for independence.

It is widely accepted that the three leaders' dominant characteristic was that of strong leadership. Their single-minded drive to bring food to the table of their respective peoples has been at the expense of civil liberties on the Western model, which these leaders argued was a necessary sacrifice. But unlike Mr Lee and Dr Mahathir, the price for Mr Suharto was a heavy one.

The repression of the Suharto years, and the enduring corruption, proved to be politically fatal for the retired general who came to power through an anti-communist coup and uprising in 1966. He was ousted in 1998 under similar circumstances – the result of a people's *reformasi* uprising that was long waiting to happen, though triggered by the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Suharto's downfall was as earth-shaking as the financial crisis that swept the region.

A little known fact is how the financial crisis also brought Dr Mahathir and Mr Suharto closer together. It also caused a rift between Dr Mahathir, in his final years as prime minister, and his pro-IMF deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Suspicious that Mr Anwar was trying to play out the Indonesian scenario in Malaysia to oust him, Dr Mahathir shocked the world when he did a counter-strike and threw out his deputy and anointed successor in what many still believe was a political conspiracy. The sacking of Mr Anwar, who once called Mr Suharto "*ayahanda*" using the most reverential form for "father" in the Malay language, led to the rise of Mr Abdullah Badawi as Dr Mahathir's alternative successor.

Changing Expectations

The emergence of Mr Abdullah in Malaysia coincides with the rise in Indonesia of a series of post-Suharto leaders, peaking with the election of Dr Yudhoyono in 2004. They form a new generation of leaders after Mr Suharto, Mr Lee and Dr Mahathir. This new cohort of leaders, which includes Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, carries the burden of continuing the legacies of their towering predecessors. But the new leaders face a different generation of citizens who will not unquestioningly accept the old style of leadership -- benevolent or otherwise.

It is a generation that wants more freedom and space to do many things they regard to be within their rights as citizens. This transition to a new ASEAN is now a major agenda of the region. We see this in the ASEAN Charter, which reflects the changing values of the regional organization that was first put in place in 1967 by the founding leaders, led by Mr Suharto.

The Suharto generation of leaders is clearly passing from the scene. As ordinary mortals, they have their strengths and their weaknesses. It is understandable to heap praise for the good that they have done, and to feel aggrieved by the impact of their foibles. But the younger generation of ASEAN citizens must maintain a sense of balance and be guided by their Asian values: They should honour those who have done good, even as they do not forget the painful scars of repression. Pak Harto clearly deserves this.

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