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Emil Salim [Indonesia, Minister of Environment]

Emil Salim

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Interviewee: **EMIL SALIM**
Interviewer: Nancy Chng
Date: 18 November 2014
Location: Jakarta, Indonesia

0:00:19

Nancy

Pak Emil Salim, thank you for talking with us this morning. You have served the country in several important capacities. I would like very much to hear about your days in the 1940s, when you were inspired to fight for the country's independence.

0:00:34

Emil

First, why to fight? Why to join the Freedom's Movement? I was in a Dutch school, together with Dutch. But it was a privilege for me to be in a Dutch school. So, I have my Dutch friends. We were in elementary school, young. We played together, and fought together, and so on. But after playing, when you entered the clubhouse, then suddenly, all the white people, white-coloured people, were free to enter, but I myself could not. When I asked why, I said, "These are my friends." (They told me) "But you are brown, you are coloured." I said, "What's wrong with my colour?" They said, "Well, you're not white." Then suddenly, I noticed that I'm not equal to the white people, so I could not enter the clubhouse. I could not drink together. You can play together outside, but you cannot enter inside the clubhouse.

So, then I realised, there's something different between me and the white people. I asked my father, "What is wrong? Why am I not allowed to enter the clubhouse?" He said, "Because we are not Indonesians." Indonesia was not known at that time. I'm talking about '36, '37, 1937, '38. You are nobody, you don't have a country, and you don't have a nation. You're nobody. You're an inlander it's called, son of the land, but (you do) not own the land. So, because you're brown, your colour is brown. There I feel injustice. But then my father told me, "Your colour must be brown, but your brain power is not. So show in the class, that in spite of the colour of your skin, you are smarter than the others". That pushed me very hard to become a kind of a champion in the class.

Then I pushed writing articles. When it was chosen, and when it was read in front of the class, and then my name was mentioned, then I feel, "Look, I'm brown, but not my brain."

So, when the independence broke out, you feel relieved. Now I am somebody. From nobody to become somebody. So, it was a kind of finding your identity. You are somebody in the world, you're not a second-class citizen. That drove me... the spirit, the fighting spirit. When the war was over, and we won independence, and Soekarno returned to Jakarta in 1950.

By '51 I graduated from high school, and the first thing I did was go to the Economics faculty. When I then graduated from the Faculty, and I was assistant to Professor Sumitro. When I was chosen to be, elected to be, have the chance to get the scholarship from Ford Foundation to study in Berkeley, I grabbed it and agreed. It was called the Indonesianisation Programme by Sumitro, and the head of this group was Widjojo. Every Friday, we, (no) every Saturday, we had a discussion. All the... we are ten of us, the Berkeley students. There was Ali Wardhana, Sumarlin and so on. And the discussion was like this: Suppose we have a chance to build the country, how will you build, what will you do in building the country? How do you plan the development of Indonesia?

0:04:21

So, you have already a kind of a dream developed in the Berkeley period at that time. Strangely enough, later, when we returned, when we were teaching, and the New Order came, then we were teaching, the five of us, at the Army School. Widjojo, Sadli, Subroto, Ali Wardhana and myself.

After teaching in the evening, you have dinner together with these big army leaders. Generals, colonels and so on. After dinner, discussion is important. So, it's free. Suharto, the head of the school, Seskoad, it's called, in this building, "I am the boss, and I assure you there is no censorship. So, you are free to talk. There's nothing that will record you, you are free to talk. Anything." So, the army people asked questions... They asked very sharp questions. Questions that were never raised outside, in the public, because it was very difficult. Sensitive, straight (questions). How is the country now? What is your assessment? Are we on the right track? Are we going the right direction? How will Indonesia be twenty years from now? What is unique? What is wrong? What is... Where are the difficulties?

If we follow the course of action right now, where will, what will Indonesia be for the next fifteen, twenty years? And that reminds us of the discussion in Berkeley.

0:06:03

The difference is, when we were in Berkeley, we discussed theoretically, based on your readings, and so on. But when you are in the army school, you have to take into account the theory with the conditions as it exists. They bring in today's reality, and we brought to them the future orientation. There it, somehow it meets. In the future, our main theme is we must put the economic house in order first. And then somehow, Suharto came to Bandung, and we were invited to see him personally. So, we met him, and there we found out that many things that we proposed, he agreed, he agreed... and in his quiet way. But we also know that he is a man of... practical man, very rational, sharp, fast, his perception ability is very sharp, very fast. Then he asked to assist him as Ketua Presidium.

0:07:15

[Nancy](#)

So, you had to focus on economics.

0:07:16

[Emil](#)

Yes, we had to focus on economics. Widjojo was economic affairs, assisting Sudjono Humardani, and we were under Sudjono Humardani.

0:07:25

[Nancy](#)

He's a FINEC (Financial Economics) guy, he's always finances, and economy.

0:07:28

[Emil](#)

He's a good friend of Suharto. He's very close. But important(ly) is, he doesn't understand economics. We were able to push him aside, so that Widjojo could go straight... So, the key is to show to the President that, "Look, we know more than him." To show in a way, the language of economics that he doesn't understand. Direct access is very important. If you have (a blockage) it is very difficult. Sudjono becomes sidelined, and Widjojo becomes the ear of the President, got the ear of the President.

0:08:06

[Nancy](#)

And personally, Suharto liked...

0:08:09

[Emil](#)

...liked Widjojo.

0:08:10

[Nancy](#)

Very Javanese style. He knew how to approach him, unlike Pak Emil.... (Laugh) who is non-Javanese.

0:08:18

[Emil](#)

I have learned my lesson at that time. We had a meeting, so the five of us and Widjojo, and then came the idea of how to overcome the crisis of rice. But then came the idea from one of the officers of the army to have artificial rice. I smelled something.... This is not right. To build a country based on artificial rice with so many people, and so with this sophisticated equipment. I was at the time very young, very naïve. I jumped and said, "It's nonsense. This is not right, Mr President."

0:09:00

Nancy

In front of Suharto?

0:09:01

Emil

In front of Suharto, like a Sumatran, like... "This is not right. This is... that is cheating. Let's go back to normal rice production through rice production. Have a firm rice production programme, and not this nonsense." Along that line... Everybody was shocked, of course.

0:09:21

Nancy

The room was quiet? The room was quiet after you spoke? Nobody said anything?

0:09:26

Emil

No, the room was quiet and Suharto (was) also quiet. Anyhow, the meeting (was adjourned) to think (it) over. Decision was not taken. Usually in Indonesia, when the decision is not taken and (the meeting is adjourned to) think (it) over, it means (it is) rejected. So, I was happy. But outside, Widjojo told me, "Suharto is Javanese, you know?" "Yes", I said. So, I was then told by Widjojo that the way of talking is - how to get things through without hurting feelings. There is this style - stick to your principle, but the way you express it is very important. So that you don't, because of the way it's expressed is controversial, there are good ideas being rejected. So how to build, package it in the right way.

0:10:25

Since then I have learned my lessons and... to become Javanese. But important (thing) is, Suharto knew that I am not Javanese. The others are Javanese. So sometimes, when we are discussing, and it becomes intimate, they speak Javanese. I don't understand. Then Suharto realised that and then he apologised and... But every time when I meet him officially as a Minister, after our talk, then he asked me to drink, and so on and then he gave me lectures on the Javanese culture. The principle of *menang tanpa ngasorake* - victory without defeating, enrichment without materialism and rich without material. These kind of Javanese (sayings). He gave me a book - the *Butir-Butir Budaya Jawa* (Grains of Javanese Culture), and so on. Every time when I go there after official (engagements), the business is over, then we talk. We talk Javanese. He taught me the Javanese culture, which is fortunate because then I knew what his weak side is, what his strong side is, so how to come into his point then... and that was helpful. Because after I became Transport Minister, suddenly I was, there was a change in the Cabinet. I was invited to be, early in the morning with him on a boat trip. We took a boat trip to the harbour of Tanjung Priok, the dirty and the

Ciliwung, mouth of Ciliwung, polluted, very polluted. So, we went there, the two of us and so... and he showed me... "Look," he said, "It's very dirty." "Yes, it's very dirty." I didn't understand why he took me there. It was early in the morning. Then he said... and just... "It was '78, 1978, so we had just started ten years (of) development. '68-'78, and now it's dirty like this. Can you imagine what (will) happen in year 2000, if we go on like this? How will Tanjong Priok look? How will this river look?" He was very excited. Then suddenly he said, "We must avoid this." "Yes, Mr President." "That's why I ask you to become Minister of Environment." I was shocked. I said, "Me?" He said, "Yes." (I said,) "I'm an Economist, I don't know about Ecology, honestly Mr President." "Pak 'Harto," I called him Pak 'Harto... He said, "Well, economy and ecology are the same. Economy is the household of human-beings; ecology is the household of nature. It's households. You know the household of human-beings, now household of nature. Get this - economy, ecology, merge it into one." "Ecology, economy," he said.

0:13:46

"Second, how can we develop without creating dirt? *Pembangunan tanpa merusak* - Development without destroying. So that by the year 2000, we must not get like this", he said. "Good luck", he said. "Congratulations, good luck." So, I was really shocked. "My god," I said, "What is environment?" Anyhow, he trusted me. But why is this meeting important? Because I have convinced to him, I have confessed to him that I don't understand ecology... because later, when I faced a crisis, a conflict, because one of the companies wanted to develop a cement factory in a karst mountain in Gombong. Karst is a kind of a sponge for rainfall, so that it absorbs... in water, underneath... so ground water, river. So it is very important. But karst is also an ingredient for cement.

0:14:51

[Nancy](#)

So, they will take that, they will be removing that mountain.

0:14:54

[Emil](#)

Mountain... to build a cement factory in Gombong. It was endorsed by a (Suharto's) family. So, I went to him and said, "Mr President, there is this karst. Well, this karst is a sponge that absorbs rainfall, and therefore there's a lake on the beach." "Yes, I know," he said. "And there's an underground river to Gunung Kidul." "Yes," he knows that also. "And Gunung Kidul is very dirt(y) and dry, that needs ground water." "Yes," he said. "And therefore, it's important." "Yes," he said, not knowing what I wanted (to say) ... "Well, Mr President, Pak 'Harto, Pak, I have a problem." "What?" "People want to build a cement factory over there." "Who?" "Your family." "It's impossible," he said. "But it is still..." I brought the document signed by one of his family. So... He looked at it, and he said, "Tell her that I don't want that, I reject this. Tell her that it's my order." So, it was rejected.

So, I went to the member of his family, "Pak 'Harto asked me to inform you that it's impossible." Well, the answer that I got was very interesting: "I thought I was helping development of having investment in there. But if it is against environment, please follow." He called me "Om, uncle, follow... we don't want to be... that you will be in jeopardy." So, that friendship, that kind of friendship was built between environment and development. So, any time I have a difficulty, I always reminded (Suharto), "I don't know environment, I have warned you. But now I have this problem, I need you." Something like that. That was most helpful in conflicts that I faced with those against environment.

0:16:52

[Nancy](#)

But leadership, or good leadership also entails listening to good advice. But at some point, Suharto stopped listening to the Berkeley mafia, or to good advice.

0:17:03

[Emil](#)

Why? I noticed at that time that children become...

0:17:08

[Nancy](#)

Powerful.

0:17:09

[Emil](#)

Children become grown up. One soft point that Pak 'Harto has is his children. He loves his children very much. Tommy for instance, is one of his darlings. Why? Tommy liked to race in a race boat, race car. He had an accident. He broke his... So he has here and something here (Point to his forehead), and it was broken such that you can see the brain. He was brought to the hospital. The doctor gives up. They gave up, it's impossible to...

0:17:49

[Nancy](#)

To save.

0:17:49

[Emil](#)

Yes. But here, I see the power of faith of Pak 'Harto and Ibu. They asked to be left alone with him, with Tommy, in the room, in the Pertamina Rumah Sakit (Hospital).

0:18:07

Nancy

The hospital.

0:18:09

Emil

The hospital. There, later I'm told, they were praying... the two of them only. Later I'm told that Tommy felt he was walking to a dark room, suddenly he heard the voice of his father, of his parents.

0:18:34

Nancy

Calling him?

0:18:35

Emil

Calling him. So, he returned, and that was the possibility for getting to be back again. Relieved. But imagine, yes? A parent that saw your child dying and suddenly living again. How is the relationship, of intensive love?

0:18:59

Nancy

And that's why he gave Tommy a lot of concessions. The Mobil Nasional... the clove business, and it created a lot of resentment, and the economists, economic ministers, people who were his close advisers could not say anything to dissuade Suharto from doing this sort of unfair practices?

0:19:28

Emil

If a leader becomes long and too much in power, and everybody knows that his future, the future of you is very dependent on him, and he becomes a leader that is powerful for quite a long time, more and more in power, then you have the inclination just to give in, in whatever is being asked. So, the intention, the need to be against, will be very weak.

0:20:02

Nancy

It will be more difficult.

0:20:03

Emil

More difficult, because you know that next year he will still be in power, five years from now, he will be in power and so on. He has been in power for thirty years. So, you build an apparatus which is a “yes man” apparatus.

0:20:18

Nancy

In your overall assessment of Suharto as a leader, how do you describe him?

0:20:24

Emil

One, he is a firm leader. He called always for the maintenance of the objective. Once he said, “I want X, all of us must focus on X,” and he does not deviate from it. One is the connection between Sabang and Merauke in Indonesia. “We must create one nation in order that I can, I as in the President in Jakarta can communicate with Sabang and Merauke with Jakarta, to assure one nation.” So, we built a satellite that transformed the communication links that can communicate (between) Sabang and Merauke. But the risk involved like this satellite, the risk is there. Nobody is doing that except Canada and the United State. Even if we don’t have the technology, so we have to borrow the technology, and if it’s costly. It is still his decision, with the risk. It may fail, because something may happen in the end. There’s no experience, no knowledge, yet he is firm. Maintenance of the objective.

0:21:27

Nancy

In his later years, did you get disillusioned with his leadership?

0:21:30

Emil

No, I see it like this actually. After thirty years, a new generation grew up, a new time, a new era, and a new era demanded a new, different leadership. So, he does not fit in this new time horizon. Thirty years is very long. From ‘70s... from ‘68 till ‘98. Thirty years is too long. (There was) a generation change. I myself don’t understand the young generation anymore. I feel that the time has actually come in ‘93. In ‘93, I was helping him. ‘68 till ‘93. It’s twenty-five years, so twenty-five years together with Suharto, we have a close relationship. He called me and said, “This time, I’m not asking you (to be) in the next Cabinet.”

Frankly speaking, I was relieved. After so many years since ‘78-’93, fifteen years in the environment, you become dull, you become... your whole energy is already squeezed. Your imagination, your creative power is already squeezed.

0:22:54

Nancy

No stimulation?

0:22:55

[Emil](#)

No... you don't have ideas anymore. You think as usual, business as usual. So, frankly, I was relieved. "Mr President," I said, "I am very relieved that I'm not (in the next Cabinet) because I have been helping you for twenty-five years and it has become a routine, and the routine becomes dull. You don't have creativity, you feel something in you, any challenge that you face you don't know anymore, how to face (them). The new challenges that come up, you are not equipped, because you are trained in the previous challenges." I was speaking about myself. He was quiet, and then he said, "Yes, in a way, I feel the same." "Oh, my god," I said. Then he said, "Ibu (Suharto's wife) had already asked him also to resign. I'm already too long (in power). You (have served) twenty-five years and I am sixty years old. We have been too long here."

0:23:54

[Nancy](#)

But don't you feel that when people are in power too long, it is harder for them to relinquish power?

0:23:58

[Emil](#)

Yes.

0:23:59

[Nancy](#)

They don't know how or when to stop?

0:24:02

[Emil](#)

It's the environment... when we talk like this... intensely, he reasoned, "Yes, I also want to leave, I think." He said, "Ibu," his wife also wants him to leave.... I will say that. I was also a member of the top of the Golkar [Party]... top. There is the Dewan Pertimbangan... here is the executive... and here you have the board, where the ministers are there, and he is chairing. We have this meeting there. He was telling, in the meeting, "I think the time has come that also I resigned," he said. In that meeting, in 1993, and... "Please prepare." In a way he was asking who we think could be the next... and so on... He was asking the leadership, Harmoko was the Chairman... to then find out... "Harmoko," he said, before the decision is taken that he withdraws, can he give him the opportunity to have a survey on how the public feeling is, the reaction (to him resigning)." He said, "Okay, alright." Six months later, we had another meeting to listen to the survey results. The survey results said that eighty-six percent was against him to resign

and want him to continue. So, "Mr President," Harmoko said, "from the Golkar point of view, it's not wise if you withdraw, retreat." So, in a way, it's expected that he continues.

So, what is my point? My point is the surroundings, the political leaders around him, the family, the business leaders, all are pushing him to go on. But I feel, personally he himself felt the time had come to stop. Why did the business leaders and the political leaders and the family want to push him on? Because they have an interest in him. Harmoko is still Chairman because of him. Without him, he is nothing. The business people around him, Bob Hasan and so on, (were around) because of him.

0:26:18

[Nancy](#)

My final question for you is: How about the new Indonesia under Jokowi. Do you need a powerful leader like Suharto again?

0:26:27

[Emil](#)

We have past phases of leadership, which I think Indonesia needs. You need a strong leader like Suharto during that period. But after that period, especially the 2000s, you need a different type of leader. SBY (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono) was a leader for the transition, for the transition from the Suharto period to the new one, to the democratic one. But filling democracy, I think Jokowi is [at] the right time, and I'm hopeful that he can bring (democracy), because he is democratic, he is from the bottom (masses). He is smart, yes, and he is not corrupt, that's the key. He has no links with the big business. These are the criteria for the right leader for Indonesia in the future. I hope that he will stay that way. I hope that the business, the mafia groups could not control him.

0:27:29

[Nancy](#)

Thank you very much Pak Emil. It was a very good interview with you.

0:27:33

[Emil](#)

Thank you.

0:27:34

[Nancy](#)

It was a very good interview with you.