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Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono [Indonesia, President]

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono

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Interviewee: **SUSILO BAMBANG YUDHOYONO**

Interviewer: Donna Cheng

Date: 8 August 2017

Location: Singapore

00:00:20

[Donna Cheng](#)

Thank you President Yudhoyono, for agreeing to do this interview with us here on Digital Narratives of Asia. Looking forward to hearing your insights. You were the sixth president of Indonesia, in your country with over 200 million people. You had an illustrious career in the military, you achieved much and, in terms of your experience in your military, how much of that did you bring into how you ran your country when you were president for two terms? How much of that military experience shaped you and made you the kind of president that you were?

00:00:53

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Yes, that contributed a lot to my work as a President of Indonesia. We know that there are set of values that we adopted in the military arena, such as - can do spirit, never give up, mission must be accomplished. There will be always a solution to any problem. That's important to apply all principles, all values that I exercised during my military journey. Some people say because I was a general before I joined the race, whether it is an asset or a liability. For me, it's an asset. Yes, I did understand that the people of Indonesia hate the army in the past, because they thought that army did not respect democracy. Our history says that I was one of the architects of the military reforms, and the people of Indonesia knew me, that I was a general that truly respect democratic values. So, with all those things, I do believe that all I have during my military career can be well applied, can be a contribution to the success of my journey in leading Indonesia.

00:02:43

[Donna Cheng](#)

Was there anything that, as a military leader, was there anything that probably is different from being a president?

00:02:51

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Yes, even though there are a lot of similarities in both governmental leaderships and the military leaderships, politics is sometimes having its own rules, its own norms. So, I need to adjust, and to adapt with the ongoing challenges in entering politics. In the military world, the task of say, army generals, army colonels, is to command. To exercise his command authority and to manage military organisations. People often say that missions must be accomplished, no discussions, no interpretations, no other alternative. In politics of course, when I was leading Indonesia, I was also commanding as

commander-in-chief. I was also leading and running the government and managing the national development. But politics is politics. Sometimes we need more.

00:04:27

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, early in your presidency, December 2004, the tsunami struck. It was devastating. How did you, as a leader of that time, of the country, how did you feel, and what did it take for you to rally your people, to rally your leaders to put together the country and to bring everything back together again?

00:04:47

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Seeing the scale of the destruction that was occurring in Aceh, I was so shocked that was really big disaster. 200,000 people died or missing. So, first thing that I did was flying, and coming to the disaster area. I had to see myself, the situation on the ground before making my decision and taking actions. Because everything was flat on the ground, I thought it was also a national disaster. So, we conducted very massive and intensive operation to save more lives. Thanks to the Indonesian military. Thanks to the international organisation that also contributed to our big task. Next of course, after about three months, I was establishing reconstruction agency. Post tsunami reconstructing agency equipped with a master plan - how to reconstruct and rehabilitate Aceh after tsunami? Then finally we could rebuild Aceh after around two to three years with strong spirit, with strong determination and of course hard work. Remember, at that time, there was still conflict in Aceh. But since day one, I declared that we have to have cease fire. No more armed conflict in the sense that we have to stop fighting. Let's work together to help the people. To save the lives of our brothers and sisters.

00:07:00

[Donna Cheng](#)

It's clear that you had to be firm in telling everyone to put aside our differences and work together. Earlier you spoke also about consensus building being something important for you as a president. So, during your time as a president, it was a period of unprecedented stability in the country. You also served longer than any other democratic presidents. What is it, you think, that made you able to do that for your country and for yourself?

00:07:38

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Stability is a must. It's very important because without stability we could not develop our economy. Without economic growth, we cannot promote the prosperity of the people. But I did understand at that time that maintaining stability, it does not mean that I have to conduct repressive masses. I tried to choose another way in maintaining

stability. I introduced the importance of upholding the rule of law. To substitute the previous masses that was taken by the government of Indonesia, that was in nature, more repressive. If you are asking me why I could stay longer in my position compared with other leaders in the democratic era of Indonesia, probably, the people of Indonesia could have both. Number one - freedom, liberty, the democracy. But on the other hand, they could have also better living standard, better prosperity. If we could give both, not we have to choose one. Liberty and security, liberty and prosperity, democracy and economy. Then the people will accept our policies, our leadership. That's why I was re-elected in 2009 with stronger mandates.

00:09:32

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, it's not one or the other? You spoke about the challenges earlier. It wasn't easy for you, there were challenges. What was the most challenging situation, and how did you overcome that?

00:09:46

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

There were many challenges that I face in ten years' time. I remember at least we encountered three crises. Number one - tsunami. I have talked already on our big endeavour in overcoming disaster in Aceh, tsunami. Number two - I remember when the price of oil was skyrocketing. Very big increase in the price of oil, it meant that I have to increase the price of fuel, and I have to make very difficult decision but necessary, to increase the price of fuel up to 140%. I encountered big protests across the country, and I did realise that the people were very angry because of the decision but I have to save the Indonesian economy. With that decision, I have to do something to the poor community. So, I developed a compensation policy, gas transfer, to help the people on the ground, who faced difficulties in fulfilling their daily needs. Number three - when we also encounter global economic crisis in 2008/2009. Remember ten years before in 1998, Indonesian economy was collapse, because we could not overcome the existing crisis. Taking that lessons, I tried to work together with all stakeholders, the cabinet ministers, the governors, the state-owned enterprises, the private sectors, the economists, to work together, day by day, night after night to find national solution to develop national policies. I could say happily that because of our togetherness, our cohesion with correct policies, then we could at least minimise the impact of the crisis. Our growth was going down to four-point-five percent from six percent and more, but only a year. We could bounce back a year after. So, made Indonesia number two in terms of growth among the G20 members. Those three crises were very challenging for me because it's about my responsibility.

Other challenging issues that I faced during my presidency were number one - in solving arm conflict in Aceh, and number two - in conducting reconciliation with Timor Leste. Let me tell you firstly on how I could decide to have a peace process in Aceh. Many people did not support my ideas. They were thinking there is no dialogue, I should say, negotiations with the rebellion, with separatists. But I kept convincing my people,

military operation is not the objective. The objective is ending conflict in Aceh. Aceh was still part of Indonesia. We could bring peace again in the province of Aceh. So, I stuck to my decision, and I persuaded all sides to be on board, and finally I could make it. We could end conflict... Aceh only in one year, after thirty years of separatisms. It was also challenging initially, it was very difficult, but finally I received big support from the politician, from the parliament, from the military, from the police, and of course the people of Aceh. Second challenge is how to conduct reconciliation with Timor Leste. The leadership in Indonesia, myself, and also leaderships in Timor Leste, Xanana Gusmao, Ramos-Horta, Mari Alkatiri, and other friends of mine, were having same challenge - how to convince their own people that we have to enter new chapter in our bilateral friendships and relations, because when we were breaking up, the situation was very unpleasant. You remember? The emotion was high in both sides, in Indonesia and Timor Leste. But I tried to persuade my fellow Indonesians, let's close our past. Let's put our past behind us. Let's look at the future. Timor Leste will still be our neighbour. Why don't we develop a strong friendship and partnership forever? It is important not only to people of Timor Leste, but also for us, Indonesia. In the beginning, of course, I confronted many restrictions, many oppositions, but in the end because I was consistent in persuading this policy, these actions, then we could succeed. And now I am pleased to say that Timor Leste is one of our strong, partners and close friend. I am also maintaining my personal relationship with all leaderships in Timor Leste. So, all those things, three crises, two big challenges that I was facing during my tenure as president.

00:09:46

[Donna Cheng](#)

Right, you've spoken about leading Indonesia, now let's move on a little bit to the international stage. As president, you introduced the Thousand Friends, Zero Enemies policy. That's a really friendly policy. What was your thinking behind this inception of this programme?

00:17:13

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

In my own experiences after around thirty years served in the military, I do believe in several things among others, that peace is better than war. War can be avoided by for example, means of diplomacy. If we are talking about war, then there is war of choice, and war of necessity. It means we could choose whether we should go for war or not. Confrontations, things can be avoided. In my own predictions, there will be no enemy for Indonesia in the medium run. So, what we should do is build partnerships, build cooperation. In my tenure, I could develop sixteen comprehensive, or strategic partnerships, with many nations all over the world.

00:18:40

[Donna Cheng](#)

Clearly, you enjoy working with leaders in the region, as well as other world leaders. Are there personal relationships that you cherish, or that you have developed over the

years? Like you talked about Timor Leste, and how you still have personal relationships with them.

00:18:55

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

I enjoy working together with all leaders, but I pay high attention to be having good personal relationship with leaders of Indonesia's neighbouring countries. For example, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines for ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nation), and also, Timor Leste, Australia and PNG (Papua New Guinea). Why? Geopolitically and geoeconomically we must be able to cooperate, to work together for the benefit of all of us. We have to realise that among neighbours, sometimes we are facing issues of tensions that is unavoidable, it is also happening in other parts of the globe. So, leaders must work together, maintaining high spirit of cooperation, while finding a proper, wise, and peaceful solution. I could say, sometimes, between Indonesia and Singapore, between Indonesia and Malaysia, we have an issue here and there. But I could call directly to my good friend, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, or my good friend Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and Najib of Malaysia, that we have to take care of this thing wisely, not to further escalate and we could work together, and we could find good solutions for that. There are a lot of things that we could do together, but the principle is maintaining personal relationship. That's sometimes very helpful in overcoming the dispute we may have. I was a part of, of course together with other leaders of ASEAN, in ensuring that ASEAN can play significant roles in the region. ASEAN should not be abstained in dealing with regional affairs, but we must be really active, sometimes proactive in being part of maintaining peace and security and developing our regional economy. If I could remember what Indonesia has done for ASEAN, I remember for example when behind the screen, I persuaded Myanmar to go ahead with democratic system that Myanmar has promised already, like other western countries want to see Myanmar to be more democratic. Indonesia understood at that time that the big challenges faced by Myanmar is not only the democratic system process, but also maintaining national unity and security. That's why in my personal relationship with the leaderships of Myanmar, from time to time in ten years, I convinced them that Indonesia is fully supporting Myanmar to maintain its national unity and security, while persuading Myanmar to continue its democratic system process. Because we were playing second track diplomacy behind the screen, Myanmar could accept the way Indonesia played its role. Other things, I have to say that there was a dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. I was chair of ASEAN at that time, and the United Nations told ASEAN, if ASEAN cannot solve the problem, so the UN will take as an international dispute. So, I convinced other colleague, ASEAN leaders that... should not happen. We have to take our own responsibility in dealing with our own problems. I convinced Ban Kee Moon, the secretary general of the UN, my good friend as well, ASEAN will solve its family affairs. To cut my story, I talked to both Prime Minister Hun Sen and Prime Minister Abhisit, why don't we find quick solution, win-win solution. It was firstly, very difficult. Both Prime Minister Hun Sen and Abhisit did not agree with the formula of ending the dispute over several borders between the two countries. I persuaded again and again behind the screen, behind the door, until we agreed that take and give is the formula, and everything must go to the international law. So, number one, we could

avoid bigger arm clash between the two. The dispute went to the international forum. That's, in my view, our success in ASEAN, that we could do things internally, if we are willing to do so, where we are having strong spirit to deal with our own affairs.

00:25:43

[Donna Cheng](#)

I like what you said about ASEAN being a family. This family has existed for fifty years now, the ASEAN celebrates fiftieth anniversary. What do you think ASEAN has done right?

00:25:55

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Couple of things. Number one - ASEAN is able to maintain its unity, its harmony, and its cohesion as a big family. We have to maintain it in the years to come, in the decades to come, as we have proven in our history. Number two - ASEAN is also success story in gradual economic integration. More and more, ASEAN economy is more integrated. Number three - another success story in my view is, the ability of ASEAN to solve internal dispute peacefully. It is good because if not, then ASEAN will be in trouble. That's our strength, by having spirit of cooperation dealing with family affairs wisely, then ASEAN can really prove that all dispute can be solved peacefully, internally. We have to ensure that all those things can be well maintained for ASEAN in the decades to come.

00:27:23

[Donna Cheng](#)

Looking ahead, what is your hope for ASEAN after this golden jubilee?

00:27:29

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Three things. Number one - ASEAN must be more united. Stronger and more advanced as a regional grouping, in terms of economic cooperation, security dialogue and socio-cultural togetherness. Number two - ASEAN must be continuously playing roles in the region. Must be proactive and active. We should not disengage from what's happening in East Asia, in Southeast Asia. Number three, this is more important - ASEAN in the future, must be more people-oriented. Must become people-centred associations. Not only inter-governmental association in the region, but ASEAN must belong to the people. The ownerships of ASEAN must be strengthened, with that then I do believe that all people in the region, 600 million people, will be more united, and they will think and act together for the better future of ASEAN. That's my recommendation and my thought, the future of ASEAN.

00:29:19

[Donna Cheng](#)

What a vision that is, 600 million people sharing that vision and it's not just at the top level for ASEAN.

00:29:27

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Yes. People to people contact is becoming the important pillars of our regional grouping, remember. Not only government to government, business to business, parliament to parliament, but remember, people to people partnership. People to people contact.

00:29:27

[Donna Cheng](#)

Thank you President Yudhoyono.

00:29:39

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

You're welcome.

00:29:49

[Donna Cheng](#)

For your insights, not just on ASEAN but your thoughts on leadership, and also your journey as a president. It's really inspiring. Thank you.

00:29:57

[Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono](#)

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

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