

## **Two short unexpected conversations with Pak Habibie that changed my life's path: A personal note**

On the night of 11 September 2019 while sitting in our living room with my wife, the news that Pak Habibie, the third Indonesian president, passed away reached us from the internet. My mind was suddenly filled with vivid memories of two brief encounters I had with Pak Habibie. Though I did not know it at the time, these two conversations would forever change the course of my career. Pak Habibie has changed the lives of millions of people, however the way he has done so could be different for each of us. This is a note on my two short conversations with Pak Habibie and how they impacted to my life as I remember them more than 20 years ago.

When I applied to study at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) after high school, I already had strong convictions to become an applied economist working on development issues in Indonesia. However, in the 70s and 80s, many Indonesian fathers vehemently wished their sons would become engineers. So as my father's only son, I decided to enrol in engineering in the hopes that it would make him proud. Fortunately, I was accepted in the class of 1980, which also included my wife. I enjoyed my time studying electrical engineering at ITB, and I had great respect for the profession. However, as I grew closer to finishing the program, I developed strong doubts that it was the profession for me as I still wanted to become an economist.

### My first unexpected encounter with Pak Habibie.

It was early to mid 1986 and I was in my last semester at ITB. One Sunday morning, while playing basketball on campus, a friend told me that a graduate from our Mechanical Engineering in a cohort above was getting married and a group of us planned to come to the wedding party around noon. At that time, it was rather common for students to sneak their way into the weddings of people they were not necessarily familiar with for the sake of good food. We jokingly called this activity a program to improve our nutrition, as weddings were rich sources of free meat and luxurious foods that poor students could not afford.

When I arrived, I saw that several of my student friends were already lining up for food. Instead of joining the line to congratulate the groom and bride as people would usually do before enjoying the food, I joined the line for food. These students let me go in front of them, which I thought was strange. That's when I suddenly realised that right in front of us in the line was Pak Habibie, the then Indonesian State Minister of Research and Technology that was championing a leap forward program called Indonesia "taking-off" (or in Indonesian, *lepas landas*) to vigorously bolster the country's advances in science and technology, in particular by producing high-tech products like airplanes. I felt a bit awkward standing there and so quickly introduced myself to Pak Habibie. I expressed my doubts concerning his *lepas landas* program; I could not see how it could succeed any time in the considerable future. Having heard my question, several of my fellow students began to back away slowly, perhaps a bit worried that I had insulted the minister.

They were wrong. In fact, Pak Habibie seemed quite happy to receive my question. He explained that he intended to create a surge of Indonesian PhD degrees in the science and technology fields by sending thousands of young Indonesians abroad to study at top universities. It was these young people, he further explained, that would be the ones to help him further develop the advanced industries and science and engineering research institutions he created. He then asked me back about my field of study and when I would complete my degree. I lightly mentioned that I would be graduate in 1 or 2 months. Pak Habibie then said that if I would like to join his team, I should send

him a letter. After that short conversation, we separated and at the end of the wedding party I went back to my student accommodation. I kept thinking about Pak Habibie's unorthodox ideas. It motivated me to finish my studies, learn more about Pak Habibie's institutions and plan on joining one of them.

Several days after I graduated, I did indeed write a letter to Pak Habibie describing our meeting and my commitment to join his System Analysis division. This division involved the social aspects of technology adoption and was therefore closer to my desired field of economics. In all honesty, I had sent the letter to Pak Habibie without much hope as it must have been one of thousands asking him for favours. He was a prominent figure that had little fear in challenging another strong technocrat group at that time, the Indonesia Berkeley "mafia", about ideas to develop Indonesia. To my surprise, three weeks after I sent my letter, I received a reply from his office inviting me to participate in their recruitment tests. Three weeks later on a Monday morning, I woke up as an employee at one of Pak Habibie's institutions.

And so my first, short and unexpected encounter with Pak Habibie gave me my first job. It resolved the confusion I had surrounding what I should do with my degree and opened a door to working as an analyst of Indonesia's development through his System Analysis division. I am sure Pak Habibie also properly responded to other many letters. It's just that everything came together for me at the speed of a miracle.

The System Analysis division introduced me to several development issues in regional Indonesia. However, the time I spent working at that division was not always fulfilling. It was a period filled with many disagreements with several of my supervisors and senior colleagues on what the division should do and on how we should be doing it. I never had the chance to contact Pak Habibie during this time. I was at the bottom of the ladder, one of several thousands of Indonesians working for Pak Habibie. After three years, I was grateful to have the opportunity to move to the US with my family to earn a master's degree in operations research.

#### My second unexpected encounter with Pak Habibie.

Early spring 1991, it was my last semester as a graduate student at the Operation Research program in the University of Delaware. On one afternoon a fellow Indonesia student at the university, Indra, informed me that Pak Habibie is in Washington DC (about two hours away) where he would give a talk at the Indonesian Embassy. He wanted to and asked whether I would like to go with him. My wife also encouraged me to go. So, we drove to Washington DC in my 1978 Camaro with its messy interior and deafening engine. During our journey, my car suddenly stopped, and we had to wait 15 minutes for the engine to cool down and work again. Fortunately, we arrived just in time for the speech to start.

With about a hundred people in the room, Pak Habibie talked about his idea of guiding Indonesia's *lepas landas* to become an advanced country. He described his program in improving Indonesia's human capital in advanced science and technology, the institutions and industries he developed and his team's achievements in producing airplanes. His talk was really good, the best speech on Indonesia's future development that I had ever heard. It was inspirational, highly motivational and by the end of it I was convinced that becoming an advanced country was just one small step away for Indonesia.

Then there was a Q&A session. Once the room was opened to questions, just by reflex, I raised my hand. When the mic was given to me, I thanked him for his enlightening speech and then proceeded to raise some concern. Surely achieving our dream to become an advanced country would not happen any time soon. I pointed out how institutionally weak the agencies he developed had become. In some of them, systems of promotion or decision making based purely on merits had not been implemented. There were too many incapable people recruited, dragging down the effectiveness of his institutions. After spelling out my criticisms, I suddenly realised all eyes from the front row of the audience were glaring at me. They were the high officials from Habibie's institutions. Whoops... oh well, I had said my piece and they were free to disagree. I shifted my eyes back at Pak Habibie. The man surprised me again. He was *smiling* and began to argue that he actually did recruit very capable people. He mentioned several people in the audience he worked closely with, how competent each of them was and their roles in supporting his program.

At the end of the session I joined other students in lining up to shake hands with Pak Habibie. When it came to my turn, he unexpectedly asked what field I was studying and what I wanted to do after receiving my degree. I mentioned that I was about to finish my master's program and wished to further my study and obtain PhD in applied economic modelling. However, I was not sure if I would have enough support to do so. Pak Habibie looked me in the eyes and said that if I am a straight A student, I should send him a letter. I was rather happy but did not expect much. I thought it was a generic conversation that Pak Habibie would have with any Indonesian student.

Back at my small apartment I told my wife about my short and unexpected conversation with Pak Habibie. She convinced me to follow through with my letter to Pak Habibie. It described my achievements so far, my intention to directly pursue a PhD degree in applied economics and told of the letters of acceptance I had already received from several universities. Two had already offered full scholarships. However, I was hoping to enrol in a top tier University.

A bit more than a month after I sent my letter, a letter from Pak Wardiman Djojonegoro arrived telling me that I could pursue the PhD program I wanted on a 3 year scholarship provided by the government. I knew that studying economics would be a major transition from operations research and electrical engineering, and thus I would not be able to finish my PhD within 3 years. Nevertheless, I was grateful and immediately accepted the very kind offer. In the summer of that year me, my wife and my first son moved from Newark, Delaware to Ithaca, New York. In the fall I joined Cornell University's PhD program in the economics of development (which is now part of their Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management).

That was my second and final short interaction with Pak Habibie. It was not as unexpected as the first one, since I did intentionally attend his talk. His offer to support my studies was nevertheless unexpected. The impact of this short meeting on my future career path, for sure, was huge. It provided the opportunity for me to finally become an economist and work on issues surrounding Indonesia's socio-economic development. My dream that I've had since the beginning of my adult life.

It took five years to earn my degree from Cornell. The University and American-Indonesian Cultural & Educational Foundation supported me through the program when my Indonesian scholarship had ended. Since this time, there was only one other instance where I almost had another short encounter with Pak Habibie. When my oldest sister passed away in 2012, I saw Pak

Habibie in the front row of government officers giving their last respects in the official ceremony in the Ministry of Health. The other family members and I were in the back rows. I could have gone to greet Pak Habibie, but I did not. I thought there might be another opportunity. Now that I can no longer thank Pak Habibie in person, I deeply regret the missed opportunity. I will continue to carry this regret in remembrance of the ways my brief encounters with Pak Habibie have changed my life.

I am eternally grateful for your kindness, Pak. I and most other Indonesians feel so fortunate to have had someone so bright and open-minded born among us.

Selamat jalan Pak Habibie. Rest in peace.

Budy P. Resosudarmo  
Canberra, 12 September 2019