

IN MEMORIAM:  
HAMENGGKUBUWONO IX,  
SULTAN OF YOGYAKARTA,  
1912-1988

Selo Soemardjan

It was a great shock to the people of Indonesia when on the second of October 1988 the news flashed through the air that Hamengkubuwono IX, Sultan of Yogyakarta, had died suddenly in a hotel in Washington DC, USA. The nation lost a charismatic national leader, a king, and a freedom fighter respected by people in all walks of life. To the present writer, who has served him occasionally since 1942 and permanently since the politically hectic days of 1947 as his private secretary, this loss meant the tragic end of a long-lasting relationship between a royal master and his loyal servant, but also between two personalities finely tuned in feelings and understanding.

“Ngarsodalem” or the foremost member of society, as Javanese from Yogyakarta used to call him, was born on April 12, 1912 as the first son of the first wife of Sultan Hamengkubuwono VIII. He succeeded his father in 1940 after his return from his years as an Indology student in the Netherlands and a happy father-and-son reunion in Batavia, which unfortunately was followed by the dramatic and unexpected death of his father before the two could set foot again in the Kraton (sultan’s palace) in Yogyakarta.

This all happened when Indonesia was still under Dutch colonial rule. The fact that since his early days Dorodjatun, Hamengkubuwono IX’s princely name before his coronation, was subjected to a Dutch education gave the colonial government much hope that they would have a strong and loyal vassal after his ascension to the throne. But it did not turn out that way.

At the suggestion of the Dutch government Sultan Hamengkubuwono VIII agreed to send the young Dorodjatun to an elementary and subsequently to a high school (Hogere Burger School) for Dutch citizens. In all those school years he was to live with a Dutch family to be socialized in the Dutch culture. After high school he was sent to the University of Leiden to learn Indology, or the colonial administration of the Netherlands East Indies.

But instead of becoming Dutch minded the young prince developed an anti-Dutch attitude. He could not understand why he should live with a Dutch family and not be allowed to stay with his father and mother and brothers and sisters in the Kraton. While living in the Netherlands as a student he resented the idea of being spied upon by the political police. When he discovered a disguised policeman in his vicinity he enjoyed playing cat-and-mouse games with this representative of the colonial regime.

For his close friends it was therefore no surprise, but for the Dutch administration it was something incomprehensible to hear the serious statement he made at his coronation ceremony that: "Although I have been subjected to Western education I am and I will remain a Javanese."

He proved the seriousness of his words when, five years later and two weeks after the dramatic proclamation of Indonesia's independence on August 17, 1945 by Sukarno and Hatta, he, now as Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX, of his own free will made it known to the world that his Sultanate of Yogyakarta was a part of the newly established Republic of Indonesia, with the status of Special Territory and with himself responsible directly to the President. Not only was this a severe blow to the Dutch who wanted to regain their old colonial power over the country, but it gave added strength and confidence to people all over Indonesia in the further defense of their national independence.

The Sultan also showed his consistency in resisting the Dutch and fighting for the Republic of Indonesia in his unwavering attitude at the time the Dutch armed forces invaded Yogyakarta on December 19, 1948. With President Sukarno, Vice President Mohammad Hatta, and other Republican leaders in Dutch captivity, the Sultan boldly turned down every effort of the Dutch to make him Sultan of a new Javanese state, which would be much wider and much more inclusive than his Yogyakarta Sultanate. Instead, he collaborated with Lt. Col. Suharto, guerrilla commander over Yogyakarta and since 1967 President of the Republic of Indonesia, to fight against the Dutch until the final victory. On December 27, 1949 Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX represented the Republic in receiving sovereignty over Indonesia from the Dutch Governor-General.

The Dutch Government's suggestion of making him Sultan of an enlarged sultanate on Java is evidence of the fact that the Dutch had no accurate understanding of the developments in the Republic of Indonesia and particularly of the position of the Sultan in the revolution for the defense of national independence. They still cherished the old prewar idea that the Sultan must be a loyal vassal to the Dutch and would therefore be eager to accept favors from them. They did not understand that the title of Sultan of Yogyakarta had become a title only. In fact he was the Sultan of the people of Indonesia. When at the time of the national revolution people in any part of the country referred to the Sultan, there was not the slightest doubt that they had Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX in mind. The rather small Special Territory of Yogyakarta with a population of less than 2 million was too narrow for the Sultan's national spirit. Hence his preference to stay in Jakarta, the capital of the nation, rather than in Yogyakarta. Routine matters of administration in Yogyakarta were entrusted with full confidence to Prince Pakualam as his deputy.

In the eyes of the Javanese population the Sultan was a typical traditional leader. He was traditional because of his royal status. But he was also traditional because of his personal qualities. Leadership, as defined by Ki Hadjar Dewantoro, the champion of national education until his death in the first decade of the Republic, requires the ability to present an example to the people when standing before them, to develop popular

aspirations when mixing with them, and to influence them to take the right path when standing behind them.

The Sultan was no doubt an example of courage, honesty, and democracy in his political and social behavior. He did not contribute much in the development of new ideas and programs, but he had a well balanced sense for judging from many alternatives what was best for the people. As for his influence on the people, it is said that the word of the Sultan is the law of the people, or in Javanese "sabda pandita ratu."

A psychologist observing the Sultan would undoubtedly consider he had a double personality. When in his palace he was the absolute monarch, he was dressed in the way required by tradition, and he behaved in all aspects as a traditional ruler. But once outside his Kraton he was a democrat with modern ideas who could mix without constraints with his colleagues in the government, his friends, and with other people of all ranks and status. How much he was respected, if not loved by the people, could be witnessed from the hundreds of thousands who came to Yogyakarta from everywhere and who lined both sides of the 17 kilometer long road from the Kraton to the royal cemetery on the hills of Imogiri to pay a last homage to their king. And even now, almost five months from the day of his funeral, either walking or in buses coming from within and outside Yogyakarta, people flock to pay homage to their king and leader, whose guidance they always sought in time of distress and confusion. One of the ancestors of the Sultan was respected by the people as Sultan Agung, the Great Sultan, because of his fight against the Dutch in his time and because of the leadership he gave to the people. Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX by all standards deserves the name of the Great Modern Sultan.