



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AGAINST THE ODDS:

ATTEMPTING REFORM IN SUHARTO'S INDONESIA, 1967-1998

SYNOPSIS

President Suharto of Indonesia (1967-1998) presided over one of the most corrupt regimes of the 20th century. For over three decades, the political and financial interests of Suharto's family, cronies and allies in the military dictated the policies of the Indonesian state. Nevertheless, a handful of public officials attempted to rationalize, improve and clean up the way government worked. Emil Salim and Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, both cabinet ministers under Suharto, were two such men. The pair struggled to manage the influence of the military, motivate a moribund bureaucracy and confront Suharto's many cronies. Lacking formal mechanisms through which to channel their efforts, Salim and Kusumaatmadja seized on passing targets of opportunity, structuring and adapting their initiatives on an ad hoc basis and relying on unconventional tactics. Although their successes proved unsustainable, their story offers specific lessons in how individual public officials can achieve modest change against institutional inertia and determined opposition from vested interests.

Matthew Devlin drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, in July 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Suharto assumed Indonesia's presidency in 1967 and would go on to rule the country until 1998. His regime quickly assumed an authoritarian shade as incessant fears of regional separatism and communist fifth columns allowed him to silence dissent and centralize power in the three pillars of his "New Order": the army, the bureaucracy and the Golkar party.

Suharto's grip on power was formidable; for more than three decades he ruled an archipelago of 17,000 islands spanning 80,000 kilometers

and encompassing a diverse population that would, by the end of the 20th century, number more than 200 million.

More so than authoritarianism, cronyism and corruption defined Suharto's Indonesia. Suharto and his family amassed vast personal wealth. Reports estimated that Suharto's sons earned \$100 million per year from rent-seeking contracts with Pertamina, the state oil company. Concentric circles of confidants emanated outward from the president, each ready to arrange access to sweetheart deals in exchange

for hefty fees.

This was the environment in which Emil Salim and Sarwono Kusumaatmadja had to work. Salim was a close economic adviser to Suharto from the beginning, and he held a variety of positions in the national cabinet during the 1980s and 1990s. Kusumaatmadja was similarly very much an inside man, serving as secretary of the Golkar party in the 1980s and a cabinet member in the 1990s. Both men characterized their careers as efforts to fulfill the missions of the various public institutions entrusted to them while working around the military, motivating the bureaucracy, and confronting cronyism.

THE CHALLENGE

The central pillar of Suharto's regime was the military. A longtime army officer, Suharto commanded great loyalty within the military, having risen to the highest echelon of the army before assuming political office. He bolstered this following by reserving parliamentary seats for military delegates and ensuring that the armed forces command was allowed to continue to hold and operate those Western businesses appropriated at various points throughout the anti-Dutch rebellion and early years of independence. These businesses represented an enormous source of extra-budgetary funding for the military and thus autonomy from civilian oversight.

As the sole institution with a physical presence throughout the archipelago—and a command structure that intentionally mirrored the civilian administration down to local levels—the military was a potential spoiler to any political settlement. Suharto recognized that its interests could not be ignored. In a model that was similar to other post-independence authoritarian regimes, the president was both patron and hostage to his soldiers.

The second pillar was the bureaucracy, a happy recipient of Suharto's largesse as the state

apparatus became the country's largest employer, buoyed by robust natural-resource exports and gross domestic product that grew by more than 6% in all but two of the years between 1966 and 1996. Sinecures, bribe-worthy job titles and subsistence-level base salaries kept civil servants alternately eager and desperate to perpetuate an irrational and parasitic system. A policy of *kekaryan*, or the widespread seconding of military personnel within the civilian administration, ensured that the quiescent civil service was riddled with loyalists of the New Order.

Rounding out Suharto's grip on the levers of power was Golkar. Cobbled together in the early 1970s, the party was a fiercely anti-communist movement of a rather disparate composition, though united around a program of secular economic development and a lockstep devotion to Suharto. Golkar monopolized the political stage. The military's policy of packing party ranks with retired officers assured Golkar's loyalty in much the same way as the seconding of active-duty officers to the civil service ensured military oversight of the bureaucracy. All political opposition had to operate within one of the two other approved parties, both of which were allowed to win a token number of parliamentary seats so as to maintain the veneer of competitive politics. Unsurprisingly, the Parliament's indirect election of the president every five years was a sham. Suharto was unopposed each of the six times he stood for election. In each government, Suharto picked his cabinet and then ruled nearly exclusively by decree. Occasionally the Parliament was trotted out to perform its ceremonial rubber-stamp duty.

If the interlocking matrix of the military, the bureaucracy and the Golkar party provided the basic architecture of the New Order, conspicuous corruption was the façade. The regime's defining characteristic was said to be *KKN*, the Indonesian acronym for "corruption,

collusion and nepotism.” Nearly anyone with any degree of power or influence had a vested interest in perpetuating and exploiting the informal, highly personal nature of government. In one example, the World Bank estimated that by the end of Suharto’s rule between 20% and 30% of the \$25 billion in loans it had disbursed to Indonesia had evaporated in graft. Suharto purposefully blurred the definition of corruption, going to great lengths to portray himself as a munificent patriarch rooted in age-old Javanese traditions of beneficent patronage. Millions of the country’s most impoverished citizens footed the bill for this charade.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Suharto’s Indonesia was thus the epitome of the captured state, as nepotism and cronyism made a mockery of formal lines of authority. The irrational nature of government was worth billions upon billions to those with access to the president or his family. To adopt anything approximating a systematic approach to reform was beyond the capacities of the few people who were both committed to reform and in a position to make a change. To institutionalize any such effort was to advertise oneself as a target. Attempts at change under Suharto were therefore not a matter of reform programs but of rare personalities.

Emil Salim was one of the “Berkeley Mafia,” the University of California-trained team of economists who directed Indonesia’s post-independence development strategy. A close adviser to Suharto on economic policy from the start, Salim spent over two decades in the president’s cabinet, his portfolios including the State Ministry for Improvement of the State Apparatus, the Ministry of Communication and the Ministry of Environment. Though close to power and widely respected, Salim grew increasingly disenchanted with the Suharto regime, and his 1998 resignation from the president’s final cabinet was described by some

observers as the death knell of the New Order. Interviewed in 2009, Salim clearly felt the weight of his long career in public service: “Politics is dishonest; no permanent friends, no permanent allies, but only permanent interests. For me, that was a very sad lesson.”

Sarwono Kusumaatmadja was an unlikely reformer. Beginning in 1971, he had always been a card-carrying member of Golkar, the political backbone of Suharto’s regime. He led the party as secretary-general through the 1980s before serving a decade in the cabinet, holding portfolios similar to those of Salim. Nevertheless, Kusumaatmadja had always been a progressive misfit within Golkar’s ranks. As a student activist in the late 1960s, he had been given the choice of either being co-opted to run on the Golkar ticket or going to prison. He signed up because, as he put it, “the reputation of the army detention center wasn’t very good.”

In 1998, Kusumaatmadja gave an interview explicitly calling for Suharto’s resignation, adding crucial momentum to the push toward political transition. His career in government is an intriguing example of someone who pushed for reform amid the most reactionary of regimes, within the most calcified of its institutions, and with the bare minimum of resources.

Neither Salim nor Kusumaatmadja came from Java, Indonesia’s central and dominant island. There is an acute division of the country into “Java and the rest,” and people from the outer islands are often seen as interlopers in elite circles, struggling to navigate and understand the extremely evasive and indirect form of communication favored by the Javanese. Furthermore, due to the highly sensitive nature of any reform effort, plans were rarely committed to paper and nearly always rested on verbal assurances and the indefinite subtext of circuitous conversations. To illustrate the difficulty of his position at the time, Kusumaatmadja recalled how Suharto once cautioned him: “Never mind what I actually say

to you; you have to believe in what I perceive you to have perceived me to say to you. Carry on from there. ... Life is a gamble; don't you know that? Gamble away, hope for the best."

Confounded by these challenges, Salim and Kusumaatmadja grappled with hard-line elements in the military, a reactionary bureaucracy and rampant corruption. Neither of the two ever controlled any of Indonesia's more powerful ministries, nor did they command a personal political following. They attempted to tackle the most deeply entrenched challenges of the New Order from positions of comparative weakness.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

As secretary-general of the Golkar party from 1983 to 1988, Kusumaatmadja was at the forefront of a highly controversial effort to scale back military representation and raise the number of civilians on the party's rolls. Kusumaatmadja said the initial decision to free Golkar from military control came from Suharto himself in a closed-door meeting of the party's civilian leadership. "Suharto was playing a game of balance," Kusumaatmadja recalled, "trying to balance the army's interest with the growing civilian influence in Golkar." While Suharto depended on a strong military for regime legitimacy and enforcement, he was careful to ensure that the armed forces did not amass enough power to ever challenge his place at the top. Suharto's goal aligned with Kusumaatmadja's ongoing effort to open Golkar to greater progressive civilian participation.

Following a strong showing by the party's civilian wing in the 1988 elections, the military pushed back with the "re-greening" of Golkar, forcing young officers to retire so that they might be eligible to fill the party's ranks. The military even went so far as to raid the party headquarters, taking sledgehammers to the civilian leadership's database computers. The struggle for influence within Golkar was yet

another example of Suharto's divide-and-rule strategy. "Apparently Suharto did not give exactly the same briefing to the armed forces," Kusumaatmadja recalled wryly.

As acting chairman of one of Golkar's most powerful staffing committees, Kusumaatmadja found himself at the center of the mounting civilian-military fight for control. Whichever group controlled the personnel apparatus would eventually control the party. "I had constant quarrels with all these colonels and generals from the armed forces and intelligence," Kusumaatmadja said. "We had vicious debates." He soon recognized that he and his civilian colleagues could not carry the day on their own. They would need to find allies within their opponents' ranks.

Personal networks were everything, Kusumaatmadja recalled. The military was the most powerful institution in the Indonesian state; it brooked little opposition. Courting some form of a public constituency for his program was pointless, he reasoned. Conferences, symposiums and rallies would simply provoke overwhelming confrontation. Instead, Kusumaatmadja and his civilian colleagues reached back to relationships they had established while undergoing instruction at the National Defense Council, an introductory ideological training for all would-be members of the political, bureaucratic and military elite.

"We had our networks," Kusumaatmadja recalled. "We knew who was who." His quick rule of thumb held that navy and air force officers were most likely to hold more liberal views, while the army, and especially the elite Special Forces, would be most firmly opposed to any moves that could diminish the military's control over the bureaucratic and political levers of state. Navigating the personal sympathies of the officer corps was a delicate task that rested entirely on personal connections. Kusumaatmadja described it as a minefield to which "we had a human map, so to speak."

After Kusumaatmadja identified potential sympathizers, he still had to secure their cooperation. His approach was straightforward: Understand and respect your partner's strategic goal and establish good faith in a common pursuit of it. Tactical differences would soon become secondary issues, he reasoned.

The liberal wing of the military was clear in what it wanted. While the armed forces would withdraw from politics, any civilian political leadership would have to acknowledge the special status of the military, not infringe on any of the institution's existing prerogatives, and consult closely with its command on issues of foreign policy.

Kusumaatmadja used his position on the staffing committee to demonstrate his strategic alignment with those concerns. "Whenever we reviewed a candidates list, we would weed out people with 'undesirable' ideological leanings [i.e., being overly proscriptive of the military's role]. On that we agreed. That reassured them," he said. By responding to the liberal officers' concerns in a visible and concrete way, Kusumaatmadja succeeded in downgrading the question of how the military would be pushed out of Golkar to what he described as "an issue of preferences rather than an issue of principle."

Winning the confidence of influential officers was similar to Kusumaatmadja's other experiences in cobbling together coalitions. "We had to make concessions with people with large and real followings. But I find it is interesting that if you sit down with them, exchange ideas, respect them, very often you find that their primordial frames of mind can very often be just posturing. ... You find that, 'Hey, he's different.'" With his coalition of allies identified and solidified, Kusumaatmadja was set on acting decisively, though with a keen eye to timing. Eventually, the right moment presented itself.

Whenever one of Indonesia's provinces was set to have a new governor, Kusumaatmadja's staffing committee would perform the primary

selection, deciding who the eligible candidates were. No candidate could pass without the endorsement of the committee's military members, who came mostly from the hard-line camp. Kusumaatmadja calculated that if he tried an incremental approach—shepherding individual reform-minded candidates through the process—the military would quickly get wise to his scheme and scuttle the effort. He therefore moved to have several years of upcoming governorships voted on at once, resolving to ram a whole cohort of progressive candidates past the committee without giving the hardliners time to react. If successful, his people would be named to some of the country's most influential positions.

When the process began, Kusumaatmadja recalled, "The army would insist that so-and-so should be nominated, so sure, we put their names down. But we made a separate list, also in consultation with [liberal allies in the military], and that we gave directly to Suharto." Suharto only saw the second list and duly made his selections from that group. When the hardliners saw that none of their own people had been appointed, they did not dare to openly object, given that the final decree had come with Suharto's personal signature. Kusumaatmadja had been confident of this, trusting that he could manipulate the irrational functioning of the system—the unquestioned personalism of Suharto's rule—to safeguard his coup.

When some of the army hardliners sought retribution, Kusumaatmadja called on his network of high-level sympathizers within the military to intervene. Kusumaatmadja was reluctant to discuss details, saying only, "We resorted to a lot of subterfuge."

Salim also struggled to deal with hardliners in the military throughout his career, though never in such an openly confrontational way. During his tenure as minister for communication from 1973 to 1978, Salim found himself heading an organization filled with

seconded military officers. Every director-general was an actual general, he recalled. At first, Salim appreciated their technical capacities, entrusting aviation to an air force officer and maritime communications to a navy man. Still, problems soon developed. Salim, coming from an academic background, would play devil's advocate whenever presented with a proposal, attacking it as if he disagreed so as to probe for any weaknesses.

He soon learned, however, that he was dealing with an organizational culture that prized obedience over individual initiative. "I noticed that that is not correct with the military because when they see a minister attacking, they think it means that the minister disagrees, and they just try to modify their proposal to appease him," Salim said. Those of his staff from the military simply did not respond to his efforts to solicit their views. "I, being the minister, was to be the leader, the decision maker who knew what had to be done," he said.

Although he never fully overcame this problem, Salim developed a simple metaphor that made immediate sense to many officers and often succeeded: "Writing on a blackboard with black chalk, you don't see anything ... you are the blackboard. I try out some white chalk to test whether things are really correct."

Salim also said his experience in working with the military helped him learn a broader lesson about fostering an institutional environment that is conducive to change. A reform leader, he said, has to be able to tell people, "We are dreaming of our nation, say, 10, 15, 20 years from now, a nation which will be better off, in which you can play an important role." This was especially useful for him later, when he had to confront hard-line opposition from within the military. "When you talk along that line, they are no longer professional soldiers, they are nationalists, they are idealists," he said. "When you talk about the goal of Indonesia 20 years from now, then you meet,

you have a common ground. Then there is trust and you are comrades, comrades in arms in facing, in building, the future of Indonesia." For a man who dedicated decades of study to the finer points of economic theory, Salim attached immense importance to the simple ability to dream—and to help others to dream.

Helping the bureaucrats dream

In 1988, Kusumaatmadja took over as head of the State Ministry for Improvement of State Apparatus (MenPAN), perhaps the most thankless job in Jakarta. MenPAN's mandate was to oversee the efficient functioning of Indonesia's entire civil service as it went about providing service to the world's fourth-largest population. According to Kusumaatmadja, his predecessors "didn't care a hoot for administrative reform," and even if they had, MenPAN had no enforceable authority and a miniscule budget. Kusumaatmadja summarized the coercive powers at his disposal as "draft, coordinate and urge." The silver lining to all of this, he recalled with a grin, was that "I had more or less a clean slate."

Though targets of administrative reform were hardly in short supply, Kusumaatmadja decided to focus on one issue in particular, the promotion of "functional" positions over "structural" ones. The civil service pay ladder rose in steps pegged to job titles. "You had to be head of something in order to get more income," he remembered. There was no professional or financial gain to be had from becoming more competent or more efficient at one's job. One had to be in charge of some unit or the head of some team in order to advance in the pay scale, whether or not that title corresponded to any meaningful degree of supervisory responsibility or increased output.

The problem was especially acute in the Ministry of Education. No matter how well or for how long teachers did their jobs, they would never advance on the pay scale because they

would never change career levels in the eyes of the system. They would forever remain just teachers. Unsurprisingly, the ministry had begun to hemorrhage talent as teachers left en masse for other positions that promised career paths with regular job-title changes and concomitant pay raises.

Talk of widespread disaffection within the Ministry of Education's lower ranks piqued Kusumaatmadja's interest. As a rule, he was realistic as to what he could achieve with his limited resources while at MenPAN. "I concentrated on institutions in which I was more likely to succeed," he said. Lacking the authority to compel any change and facing an entrenched hierarchy within the Ministry of Education that had a vested interest in the status quo, Kusumaatmadja again relied on a "human map" of the institution to find the best path.

At this point Kusumaatmadja had been in politics for two decades. "I more or less knew who the progressives were and who the conservatives were—where the deadwoods were," he said. He targeted those individuals he or his acquaintances already knew would be predisposed to reform and, when he didn't know anyone, his rule of thumb was to simply concentrate on those offices with the highest proportion of young, well-educated staff, gambling that they would be more receptive to his push for innovation.

Most important of all, Kusumaatmadja claimed, was his conviction that one must "eat low on the food chain. ... Never mind the bosses, because they are there to sit and enjoy their privileges and do nothing. So why waste your time with them?" This meant that he concentrated the vast majority of his time on lobbying officials at or below the deputy director-general level.

As he had done with the military, Kusumaatmadja made his move only after he carefully identified sympathetic allies. In one-on-one conversations, he explained his idea to

these relatively low-level officials, going to great lengths to make the potential benefits tangible for them. He spelled it out: "This would be your job manual if you professionalize yourself. These are the tools you'd use, and these are the benefits that can accrue after so many years." Above all else, Kusumaatmadja stressed that what he was pushing was effectively the securitization of their competency; they could prove what they knew and record their experience.

Kusumaatmadja credits their enthusiastic response to his willingness to take the time to paint them a picture of "a different world than the one they're living in now." A fortuitously-timed grant from the minister of finance aided his cause because he could then "immediately prove to whoever was interested that tangible benefits could actually be in their hands within months." Quietly working hand-in-hand with lower-level officials, Kusumaatmadja devised a performance evaluation system whereby a teacher could be promoted and rewarded if he or she stuck to the primary function of a teacher, namely teaching. He entrusted oversight to an internal ministry review panel, and retention rates rose significantly.

By the time the higher levels of the ministry heard about it, the initiative had gained momentum and had a proven record of accomplishment. By getting his program up and running before bringing it to the attention of senior officials, he was able to present them with concrete results rather than wishful proposals. Kusumaatmadja also credited whatever success he had in this effort to his commitment "to attend their meetings personally, not assigning it to my assistants. That's why people remember me up to today."

Kusumaatmadja seized on the success of the Ministry of Education project to attract the attention of those ministries most resistant to reform, "the dinosaurs," such as the Ministry of Public Health. Fresh from his success at the

Ministry of Education, he said he started “to foment restlessness within their ranks: ‘Hey, since it happened over there, why not here?’” Kusumaatmadja was poised to expand his program to the civil service administration agency and the civil service training agency, and thereby hopefully initiate something approaching systemic change. But in 1993 Suharto transferred him out of MenPAN as part of one of the president’s frequent cabinet reshufflings.

Regarding the length of his tenure and the sequencing of his priorities while at MenPAN, Kusumaatmadja was reflective: “Five years is very short. ... You don’t have to work the whole spectrum, just concentrate on what you will in several meaningful agencies and that’s it. You have to realize that your time is limited. Your results will also be limited.”

For three years in the early 1970s, Salim also headed MenPAN. As did Kusumaatmadja, he bemoaned the brevity of his tenure. In sharp contrast to Kusumaatmadja, however, he chose the far tougher challenge of eliminating bureaucratic corruption. Though his aims were loftier, his results were far humbler. He spoke dismissively of his time as state minister, indicating that nothing resembling a concrete result was produced.

Confronting cronyism

Corruption was so deeply ingrained in Suharto’s regime that it was taken for granted. Salim recalled, “A feudal pattern continued to prevail in modern Indonesia, with its cabinet ministers, directors general and so on being ‘served’ by their subordinates. With the prevalence of such a mentality, how can you even start to talk about ‘conflict of interest’? I had great trouble just explaining what a conflict of interest was.”

At the end of his stint at MenPAN, Kusumaatmadja was preparing to enter the private sector. It therefore came as something of

a surprise when Suharto named him as minister for environment in 1993. The prospect wasn’t too enticing, as he remembered it: taking over a set of responsibilities that invariably ran counter to the Suharto-linked business interests that were plundering the country’s vast natural resources. Furthermore, Kusumaatmadja would once again find himself holding a portfolio with no line authority and only a symbolic budget. But, he stressed, one could not easily refuse a cabinet appointment from Suharto. Kusumaatmadja recalled that upon arriving at his office on the first day, he had little familiarity with environmental issues. “Fortunately I was an avid reader of *National Geographic*,” he quipped.

Vast Suharto-linked industrial and mining interests saw environmental irresponsibility as a competitive advantage over foreign competitors. Kusumaatmadja realized he would have to make a symbolic move against the president’s cronies in order to achieve anything on the scale of meaningful change. He displayed characteristic caution in carefully selecting his targets. “I tried to find out who among his cronies were the most unaggressive and harmless and hammer them on the head day and night,” he recalled. “People would say, ‘Oh, he’s a brave minister, going after that fellow.’ But that fellow was innocuous. He was just doing business, contributing to the [Suharto] family, and he’s not into any power games and all that. A good man. Unfortunately for him, his relationship with the old man was not very close, so I decided to concentrate on him.”

The tactic worked, and Kusumaatmadja developed a reputation as a fearless opponent of polluting businesses despite their connections to the presidential family. “Because of that,” he remembered, “the more powerful friends of the president started to try to be in my good books.” A familiar maxim from his days at MenPAN came up again: “I always concentrate on the doable. ... Always eat low on the food chain.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Yet even with a seemingly successful strategy, Kusumaatmadja had to be extremely careful in preparing for each of his moves. A crucial element of this was managing the president himself. Kusumaatmadja always thought closely about how best to present his ideas to Suharto, whose own patronage networks he was upsetting. “I want to assure you, Mr. President,” Kusumaatmadja recalled telling Suharto, “that in the end it will do them good—they’ll do better. He will be a better businessman without us losing his respect. So you can have your cake and eat it as well.” Knowing that Suharto was proud of his military career, Kusumaatmadja presented each of his initiatives as a tactician’s challenge, plotting out each step he was to take, highlighting the boldness of it all and yet also the ways in which he had covered his and Suharto’s flanks. “So why don’t we have a try?” he would goad. “Yes,” Suharto would reply, “why don’t we have a try?” It was a deft combination of simultaneously needling the president’s ego and assuaging his fears.

One case that highlighted Kusumaatmadja’s approach involved a paper magnate whose factory was polluting a major river in North Sumatra, Indonesia’s northwest corner. The businessman had close ties to several ministers and the first family, and he previously had his security team run the former minister for environment (who happened to be Emil Salim) from his plant. Nevertheless, Kusumaatmadja had a gut feeling that the man was mostly bluster. First, Kusumaatmadja went about sounding out the man’s patrons. He met with each minister personally, assuring them, “I will take care of him, not to harm him, but to make sure he does a better business the next time around.” Second, he met directly with Suharto, and though he still tried to cast the effort as something akin to a challenge, he was frank. “Look, I want to try this,” he recalled

telling the president. “I’m going to give bitter medicine to this guy who is also your golfing friend, and this is my plan. . . .” Having won Suharto over, he asked only that the president talk to those ministers protecting the man and ask them to back off. He stressed that neither Suharto nor the ministers had to take any steps against their crony; they should simply not obstruct Kusumaatmadja. He insisted he stay in the room as Suharto telephoned the ministers, so as to be sure he understood the exact level of support he was receiving from the president.

Once again, Kusumaatmadja waited until all the pieces were in place. He then used his contacts among nongovernmental organizations, Greenpeace in particular, to lean on a Wall Street firm that was about to grant the businessman a loan. He let it be known in New York that the magnate had a serious problem with the minister for environment. He judiciously chose not to mention that as minister for environment he had no real power.

Kusumaatmadja then unleashed a media campaign against the magnate. The ability to build a public constituency behind his efforts was crucial to Kusumaatmadja’s success at the ministry, he recalled: “The Ministry of the Environment is not a line department. I had no authority, so I had to rely on strategic alliances with the public through the media.” He also knew that the media would be keen to seize on any environmental cause, as it was one of the few areas in which people could safely protest without being accused of treasonously attacking Suharto.

Kusumaatmadja’s media strategy followed the same lines as that which he used with Suharto: Present the issue as a challenge, and people will rise to it. “It’s a question of the prospect of having that recalcitrant businessman toe the line. Can he do it? Can we make him do it? So empower the people,” Kusumaatmadja said. “Make them feel—not only feel but make them realize—there is something they can do.

Can we do it?” Within three months the businessman was pleading for a meeting. Kusumaatmadja invited him to his home and served him dinner. The man conceded. “That kind of a reputation makes things work,” insisted Kusumaatmadja, “because all the industrialists sensed that, ‘Oh, this guy, he really means what he says.’”

Salim faced much the same challenge throughout his own tenure as minister for environment (1978-1993): how to bring some of the most reactionary elements of the regime to heel with one of the most impotent positions in the cabinet. One strategy he devised was to nurture the country’s university system as a personal information network. Control over the allocation of environmental research grants gave him an excuse to maintain close links with many of the far-flung campuses across Indonesia’s archipelago, thus providing him with a reliable stream of information similar to that which the military enjoyed.

When a friend of Suharto’s daughter was pushing to build a cement factory atop of one of Central Java’s most important aquifers, Salim avoided opposing the project directly, and instead characterized it as a proposal from which all the interested parties stood to lose. First, Salim recognized that the support, however tacit, of the president would always be necessary. Echoing Kusumaatmadja, he said he would reassure Suharto that all he needed was “the support of omission, not commission.”

Second, framing was crucial. The issue had to be cast in terms of personal significance to Suharto. “You must be on the same wavelength and have the same priorities as the president,” insisted Salim. Suharto came from a rural background and had an abiding attachment to Indonesia’s countryside. Salim thus framed every issue he could in terms of how it affected village life.

Third, the decision had to be made immediately tangible by quantifying the

consequences of any choice. The aim was to demonstrate a concrete tradeoff, Salim said: “So you say: Mr. President, here is a proposal. It costs X. With X, we could build a village—because you know he loves villages—and provide education, and so on. So, this or that? This proposal is being put forward by your friends but the cost—you don’t say ‘the cost is two billion;’ no, you say ‘with this money, you give up opportunities A, B, C and D.’”

However, Salim qualified his advice. “The one thing I have learned is never attack,” he said. “Don’t say that anyone is a crook or that they are corrupt. That won’t work. Rather, you must say that you understand why they are saying that we should do this. But, there is a cost involved, a tradeoff.” This was particularly important in the context of a Javanese culture that frowned on direct confrontation. With the president’s agreement secured, or at least his implicit consent, Salim would then apply pressure to the relevant sections of the line ministries that actually had implementing power. If he met any resistance, he would threaten to take the issue back to Suharto himself. He said he was never sure what would have happened if his bluff were ever called, but, “when you say it like that, they accept.”

Through tactics like these, Salim and Kusumaatmadja succeeded in grappling, as best they could, with the New Order’s most intractable problem while in one of the weakest institutions.

ASSESSING RESULTS

In the final analysis, the successes achieved by Salim and Kusumaatmadja were isolated and temporary. However, this should hardly come as a surprise. After all, the two were working amid one of the most corrupt regimes of the 20th century. Initiating sustainable reform was effectively out of the question. As Kusumaatmadja put it, “During the New Order, the whole system was closely knit, introverted

and self-serving. So any attempt for reform would be unsustainable, given the macro environment.”

While specific successes proved ultimately unsustainable, Salim and Kusumaatmadja’s experiences nevertheless offer several general lessons for reformers attempting to operate in similar environments. The most important thing for such individuals to bear in mind, according to Salim, is that “you may not know what exactly to do, but you have a vision. ... When you’re really in the midst of the battle, then this vision will shape up.” Years after those battles, several recurrent and seemingly successful tactics can be identified.

First, the question of pacing was pivotal, and the identification of limited, attainable goals was critical. Reformers met with most success when they remembered to concentrate on goals that were achievable. Effective reform often followed meticulous preparation, the painstaking identification and cultivation of alliances. The ability to secure high-level support, or at least acquiescence, beforehand would often tip the scales decisively. The realization that one could achieve significant reform by targeting the operations rather than the hierarchy of an organization was important. By “eating low on the food chain,” as Kusumaatmadja described it, one might achieve considerable change while avoiding potentially serious confrontation.

Second, the careful cultivation of private networks was invaluable. Reformers had to be prepared and committed to regularly engage both the constituents and the opponents of their initiatives on a one-on-one basis. Often, the most useful tool a reformer could bring to a problem was a “human map” of the interests involved.

Last, the personal skill to motivate and

persuade others was crucial. Whether dealing with the media, government agencies, or the executive power itself, creating a sense of a challenge was a great aid. A feeling of determination could capture people’s imagination and sustain momentum toward a goal that might otherwise prove divisive.

REFLECTIONS

The power of personality and interpersonal communication emerges as a crucial element for both of these reformers. For instance, the way that they framed issues was invariably important. Success came when a difficult but necessary choice was made directly tangible through quantification into familiar, and preferably emotive, terms. Avoiding an adversarial approach to controversial issues stood reformers in good stead. Adversaries could sometimes be turned into allies by simply broadening the problem until tactical differences were subsumed in strategic alignment.

Sometimes, as Kusumaatmadja recalled, motivating people was just a matter of being there in person. “I think communication is one of the keys to success in getting people to be motivated and to perform and to present their best,” he said. “So again, you have to be present all the time. To give an example, it’s a habit of other ministers to delegate presence to officers wherever this is a gathering of junior officers. I don’t delegate. I always come myself, and that is appreciated and remembered.”

While Salim and Kusumaatmadja’s experiences offer a cautionary tale on how fleeting results can be without a system in place to perpetuate them, they also provide heartening lessons of what resourceful individual leadership can yield despite formidable odds.

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