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Steering a Middle Course

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Steering a Middle Course

From Activist to Secretary General of Golkar

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Dedicated to the current and future generations.

May you succeed in your endeavours so that our nation can stand tall.

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Foreword by Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security, Singapore, Teo Chee Hean

I have known Pak Sarwono Kusumaatmadja for more than twenty years, going back to the time when he was Indonesia's State Minister for the Environment when I served as Singapore's Minister for the Environment from 1995 to 1997. I readily agreed when I was invited to contribute a foreword for the English translation of his memoir.

Pak Sarwono has had a long and distinguished career in politics and government, spanning the New Order and *Reformasi* eras.

He cut his teeth as a member of the House of Representatives (DPR) from 1971 to 1988, during which he served as Secretary of the Golkar faction from 1973 to 1987. He was an astute politician who became the first civilian to be appointed Secretary General of Golkar in 1983. His appointment, when he was just forty years old, injected youth, energy and fresh ideas into the party. Having established a strong track record, Pak Sarwono was appointed to then-President Soeharto's Cabinet in 1988.

Pak Sarwono is a social activist at heart. His spirit of service and dedication to the Indonesian people became his hallmark throughout his years in government. As State Minister for Administrative Reform from 1988 to 1993, he improved the public service and professionalized



the bureaucracy, including the education sector. As State Minister for the Environment from 1993 to 1998, Pak Sarwono recognized that environmental sustainability was key to long-term national development, and he introduced policies to incentivize Indonesian companies and people to preserve and protect the environment. He depended not only on his formal authority as the Minister, but also astutely drew on his instincts as a social activist and his links to NGOs and the media to achieve his aims. He was among the first to recognize the link between corporate practices and the environment. As Minister for the Environment, he proactively worked with the international community to manage environmental challenges such as transboundary haze. Pak Sarwono was subsequently appointed Indonesia's first Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries from 1999 to 2001, during which he laid the groundwork for the development and sustainable management of Indonesia's marine and fisheries resources.

Pak Sarwono made several working visits to Singapore, in both his capacities as Golkar Secretary General and Cabinet Minister. He engaged our leaders with candour about Indonesia and its views about Singapore and the world, and he worked hard to strengthen Singapore-Indonesia cooperation for mutual benefit.

Pak Sarwono's memoir traces his formative experiences as a young man coming of age in a newly independent Indonesia. No doubt these experiences shaped his orientation as an activist and a patriot, and his journey in becoming an important actor in Indonesia's remarkable development over the decades. His memoir provides insights on key events in Indonesia's post-independence history and the crucible of Indonesian politics. For friends and observers of Indonesia, there are many valuable lessons to be learnt from this vivid, engaging and important memoir.

Teo Chee Hean

A Testimonial for Steering a Middle Course

By Dr Siti Nurbaya Bakar, Minister of the Environment and Forestry of Indonesia (2014–)

The period between 1948 and 1988 was noteworthy in the post-independence history of Indonesia, a period rife in political, economic and social upheavals. Examining the available literature on the period, we are presented with an array of opinions and interpretations on the expositions of great ideas for the nation and on those who carried them out.



This book is one such undertaking; narrated in a communicative way that truly evokes the atmosphere of the period described by Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, replete with acute observations and first-rate wit. What impressed me most was how Sarwono's childhood and teenage years—coupled with the family values instilled in him and the multitude of life's challenges overcome through perseverance, creativity and resolve—made him the man he is.

The journey of the republic between 1948 and 1988 was crucial in laying the foundation for the young nation-state. For Sarwono, who was born in 1943, the period was unique as it corresponded with his

own formative years and his growing maturity as an individual.

What is compelling about *Steering a Middle Course* is how the great events of national importance have been translated into how they affected the many, resulting in a very down-to-earth and tangible narrative. Another distinguishing factor is that not only was Sarwono a witness to the political events and the modern development of Indonesia but he was an active participant in them.

To date, even in retirement, Mas Sarwono continues to be in public service through, among other things, his role as chairman of the national Advisory Board on the Management of Climate Change. His role has shifted from being at the forefront to being in the background, encouraging and counselling the younger generations by interacting with them.

How Mas Sarwono has reached this milestone is also what this book is all about. It is my personal hope that, in time, *Steering a Middle Course* will be followed by another memoir covering the period between 1988 up to the present time. The great changes that have taken place in Indonesia since 1989 were no less interesting or less dramatic than the earlier period in our history. To Mas Sarwono, I convey my congratulations on the release of his memoir *Steering a Middle Course*.

Jakarta, September 2018
Siti Nurbaya Bakar

Preface

After a long process that culminated in the first half of 2018, this memoir was finally completed, just in time to be published for my seventy-fifth birthday. In many ways, efforts for this memoir began long before its actual writing, when I was Minister of State for Administrative Reform. It was during this period that I instructed a group of young people at the ministry to conduct interviews of their colleagues and seniors, with the view to collecting material for an autobiography. Unfortunately, for reasons unknown to me, those I charged with the task were half-hearted in their efforts, and the few interviews they made were never handed in to me.

Around the early part of 2000, my journalist friend Dwi (Donny) Iswandono—who was a sports reporter when I was President of the Indonesian Association of Lawn Tennis (PELTI)—and his colleague Iput Bambang Putranto came to talk me into reviving the idea of a memoir. We also discussed the issue of the forest fires that had ravaged Sumatra and Kalimantan in 1997, the horrors of which were still fresh in our minds.

In turn, I suggested to both Donny and Iput that they begin collecting information and data on the forest fires, which then became a book titled *Kemelut Politik di Balik Asap: Refleksi atas Bencana Nasional Kebakaran Hutan 1997–1998* (Political Crisis behind the Haze: A Reflection on the National Disaster of the Forest Fires of 1997–1998). Alas, this book is not discussed in depth in this memoir, which only covers the period between 1948 and 1988.

Early in 2000, my brother Mochtar Kusuma-Atmadja and I discussed whether we both needed to write our own respective autobiographies for posterity. At the time, Mochtar did not feel the urgency to do so. He felt he had been sufficiently productive in writing about foreign

policy, legal reform, the environment and new initiatives in the cultural sphere. Mochtar believed his works should speak for themselves as part of his legacy. In fact, he tended to believe that any text on his life might end up becoming a string of self-justifications, not to mention being an egocentric exercise.

My own views on the matter were similar to Mochtar's, even though I could not claim to match his prolific writing or his track record of public service in general. But, over time, Mochtar gradually came to the conclusion that a memoir might not be such a bad idea after all, especially when its creation was supported by one's family members, colleagues and friends.

In the same light, this memoir was also the product of long deliberation, initiated long ago, pushed along with sporadic efforts, all of which culminated in the first half of 2018, when I became convinced that this memoir could be a meaningful endeavour. The project received support from my close friends, family members and even people who only knew me from afar. In the end, I decided to write this memoir, assisted by a team comprising Donny Iswandono, Iput Bambang Putranto and Apolonius Lase.

The memoir's title is *Steering a Middle Course*, and it is the first book in a series. The next book will undergo preparation—and let us hope that it will be completed—soon enough.

This memoir begins with snapshots of events that occurred in 1948, when I first became aware of my surroundings, and ends at the time I quit as Secretary General of the Golkar Party and was about to start my tenure as Minister of State for Administrative Reform.

This memoir was the product of my own penmanship—so to speak—a book of four chapters, with the help of the many people I have mentioned.

Chapter 1 covers events in my childhood up to the year 1963, when I came home from my overseas studies and continued my secondary school education. The initial text for Chapter 1 was finalized in 2006, and parts of it were used in the writing of my brother Prof. Mochtar Kusuma-Atmadja's biography, which was written by Nina Pane. Readers will discover parts in this memoir that are similar to, even identical to, the earlier sections of Mochtar's biography. Indeed, I gave Nina Pane my permission to use my account of what our family life was like when she was writing my brother's biography. In case any reader would like

to make a further study of my family's history, Nina Pane's biography of Mochtar, titled *Rekam Jejak Kebangsaan* (A Record in Nationhood) provides a more comprehensive account.

Chapter 2 narrates my life as a young adult. It opens with me as a university student at ITB (Bandung Institute of Technology) at a time marked by political tension and economic meltdown, which came to a head with the end of the Guided Democracy era and the rise of the New Order. It was also during this period that my activist friends and I in Bandung were recruited by the military to become members of parliament for Golkar.

Chapter 3 is an account of what I experienced as a member of the House of Representatives (DPR) amid consolidation efforts within Golkar towards a system of membership based on individual active volition, and the repositioning of mass organizations under Golkar. The chapter also discusses initiatives to maximize the role of the DPR through the Golkar Fraction at a time when restrictions were widespread in the country.

Chapter 4 is a record of my time as Secretary General of Golkar, under the chairmanship of Sudharmono. The chapter contains accounts that many will find interesting on the New Order's preparations for the country's political maturation through the structural transformation of Golkar. It also features events and details hitherto unknown to the public about figures with whom I interacted frequently, particularly Sudharmono, Benny Moerdani and Moerdiono.

My account was naturally based on my recollection of events, which, as I discovered during the course of writing, had the capacity for greater scope and clarity as the text developed. Of course, exact recall within the right context requires crosschecking with the available literature and, beyond that, assistance from many people, to whom I am indebted. These include in particular my contemporaries during my days of student activism, as a DPR member, and my time in Golkar. They also include colleagues who worked in the press in the 1990s and many others who helped me in various ways during the writing of this memoir.

Indeed, help came to me in the most variegated ways. The most meaningful assistance given to me during this project came in the form of the personal interviews sat for me by several people, such as my senior Rahman Tolleng in the early 2000s. Interviews with both Jusuf

Wanandi and my cousin Hartini Sofiati proved indispensable, too. However, other forms of help were also invaluable. There were instances in which I was given a document, a photo or even had my memory jogged about a seemingly insignificant event that later proved to be significant. A telephone conversation or an ordinary chitchat was often very meaningful. I could not possibly rank those who contributed to the writing of this memoir, so I will instead name them in alphabetical order. I hope I did not leave anyone out:

Agung Nugroho
Agus Sukanda
Aidy Halimanjaya
Akbar Tandjung
Albert Hasibuan
Anak Agung Oka Mahendra
Arief Witjaksono
Bruno Kaka Wawo
Diandri Kusuma Agus
Djoko Sudyatmiko
Erna Witoelar
Fred Hehuwat
Hangga Yudha Widya Putra
Hartini Sofiati
Heri Ahmadi
Ipong Witono
Jakob Tobing
Jusuf Suroso
Jusuf Wanandi
Lannya Kandar
Marzuki Darusman
Mughtar Abbas
Nina Pane
Padmono S.K.
Rahman Tolleng
Rahmat Witoelar
Rhesa Noviar
Rum Aly
Sudarko Prawirojudo

Sugeng Setiadi
Toriq Hadad
Wahyu Mulyana
Wimar Witoelar
Yoyon Suharyono
Veronika Wiyarsi

Last but not least are my own children: Rezal Ashari, Krisnan Kusmara (Nino), Devyandra and Kendisan.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation for the members of my writing team, who had the unenviable task of being my constant companions in the journey. It is never easy, as I found out, to write about oneself, a process which necessitates a support team consisting of patient, thorough and conscientious people. I would also like to thank my publisher Kompas and Tempo's Centre for Data and Analysis.

Jakarta, July 2018
Sarwono Kusumaatmadja

A Testimonial

To Remain Unaffected by Power

“May you live in interesting times”, a proverb says. Many would count their lucky stars to have lived through important moments in history.

Accordingly, we welcome the publication of Sarwono Kusumaatmadja’s (SKA) autobiography, which will surely help us understand the moments he experienced through a more discerning eye: the early days of the newly independent republic, the Soekarno era and the New Order. For me personally, this book is not just something that jogs my memory. SKA is an important figure in my life, and the scope of this book covers the time during which both of us started to become acquainted with the world.

This book also reveals my good friend to the world in new dimensions. SKA relates his life experiences with great clarity and depth, but manages to avoid being tedious with his witty SKA-esque repertoires.

The book stands as proof that to be intellectual is not merely about education but also enlightenment born out of awareness. In this regard, the book has the potential to cultivate intellectuality and maturity in its readers.

This book covers the period in which SKA grew up and eventually became Secretary General of Golkar. It is a story of great interest since not many are familiar with SKA’s background. Those who are somewhat familiar with his background will also benefit from the intimate details imparted by this book. One thing I know about SKA: he is an



honest man, which makes this book credible.

The story of Sarwono's life from childhood till high school took place in the setting of the war for independence and with Soekarno at the pinnacle of his power. Yet, somehow, this is not a political book. What makes it interesting lies in the accounts of everyday life, in the socio-economic snapshots it gives of Jakarta at the time, something unfamiliar to most young people today. Perhaps not many will even consider things like this important. But they are important if we want to understand why and how Jakarta became the city we know it today. So, in a way, this book is a testimony on "Jakarta in the Making".

This book has no shortage of anecdotes that I found compelling because I was in many of them. But I am convinced that anyone whose life was touched by SKA would also have an equally compelling experience to remember. So, this book is a study of growing up during revolutionary times—the history of reaching adulthood during the Soekarno era.

After graduating from high school in 1963, Sarwono's life revolved around the ITB campus, particularly his activism within the Association of Bandung Students (PMB). There, SKA received his early political education and formed his network of self-confident young people. These fellow students continued to hold Sarwono in high regard throughout his milestones: a university student, an activist, an MP, a grandee of the most powerful political party in the country, and a minister.

This is a compelling book because of its strength in content and context. Contextually, SKA manages to recreate the mood of the period of history in his narrative, thoughtfully letting us glimpse his experiences and the people he came into contact with. In terms of content, every part of this memoir is of substance, making it an ideal historical reference. In the hands of a cinematographer, this book could be the basis of a film on Jakarta in the early days of Indonesian independence. The film could follow the life of a child growing up and going to school in the politically stringent era under President Soekarno and the revolutionary dynamics of his rule—encompassing domestic politics and with an anticolonial tinge—in the lead-up to the Gestapu rebellion.

This book is no doubt an even more useful tool for the serious political observer. In describing his rise within Golkar, Sarwono also tells us how the party went from its early days of Soeharto's rule as an Amalgamated Secretariat to a fully fledged political entity, and

even an effective bureaucracy. To use his own language, SKA retreated voluntarily into the outer circle of the elite, even though he had been one of the principal architects of the development of Golkar into an idiosyncratic force in Indonesian politics. Along with Sudharmono, Sarwono moulded the character of Golkar at the heights of its influence, before it degenerated because of the excesses of Soeharto's power and those around him. Although Sarwono was part of the Golkar leadership, he remained unaffected by power. In many ways he never truly shed his being an activist, which allowed him to keep his conscience. But, since I may be subjective in this regard, I will allow the readers to form their own conclusions.

Those wishing to study how Indonesian politics came to accommodate, nurture and then in turn be nurtured by Golkar, this volume is an important source. The book has the authority to occupy a special place among Indonesia's classical works as one that captures Indonesia holistically. The book is indeed a kaleidoscope of being Indonesian: the expressed emotions, feelings and reactions of a citizen, to the political instincts honed through experience, and the carrying out of government business by Sarwono, with his characteristic curiosity, deference and a real love for Indonesia.

Jakarta, July 2018
Wimar Witoelar