

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.

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