In Memoriam

Professor Sarbini Sumawinata, 1918 - 2007

Thee Kian Wie

On Tuesday, 13 March 2007 Professor Sarbini Sumawinata, Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Economics, University of Indonesia (FEUI), passed away after a long illness in addition to teaching international economics and economic development at FEUI. Professor Sarbini was also the founder of the highly regarded bilingual magazine Business News, where for many years he served as Chairman of the Board.

Born on 20 August 1918 in Madiun, where he received his primary and junior high school education, Sabini left for Yogyakarta for his senior high school education at the Algemene Middelbare School (AMS). Upon his graduation from the AMS, Sabini enrolled at the School of Engineering (Technische Hogeschool, TH) to study civil engineering. Sabini quit his study at the TH after the Japanese occupied Indonesia, since he was reluctant to study at what had become a Japanese-sponsored institute.

After Indonesia’s proclamation of independence in 1945, Sarbini went to Yogyakarta to resume his engineering studies at the newly-established Gadjah Mada University, where he wanted to switch to mechanical engineering. Since there were no mechanical engineers in the Faculty of Engineering, Sarbini’s study was stalled. He then joined the Ministry of Economic Affairs as an employee because of his growing interest in economics.

After the Dutch recognition of Indonesia’s independence in December 1949, Sarbini left for Jakarta, and in 1951 was sent to Paris as a technical member of the Indonesian delegation to a United Nations conference. Afterwards, with the consent of Wilopo who was then Minister of Economic Affairs, Sarbini went to The Hague, to work at the Netherlands Central Planning Bureau under Professor Tinbergen, who warmly welcomed him. It was at this Bureau where Sarbini had his first exposure to economics. At this Bureau Sarbini studied economic planning, since upon his return to Indonesia he was scheduled to replace the Dutch head of the planning section of the Ministry of Economic Affairs.
After a one year stint at the Netherlands Central Planning Bureau, Sarbini went to Washington, DC, where he was attached to the Indonesian embassy as a staff member on study assignment (*tugas belajar*). To this end, Sarbini met with several economists at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the US Department of Agriculture and other offices, to learn more about the problems faced in economic development.

During Sarbini's study assignment in Washington, DC, Sarbini also took some economic courses at The American University. Sarbini's good examination results led an American consultant to the Indonesian embassy to suggest that Sarbini enroll for a degree in economics rather than just take courses. Although Sarbini had no previous formal education in economics, he was allowed to study for a Master's degree in economics at Harvard University, which he was able to finish in one year.

Upon completion of his Master's study, Sarbini had to return to Indonesia immediately to replace the Dutch head of the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS). Since Sarbini did not have any experience in running a statistical bureau, he requested permission to study how a large, well-run statistical office was managed. Sarbini then went to Ottawa, Canada, to work for three months at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics on a scholarship from the Canadian government. At this Bureau Sarbini learned about the organisational and managerial problems of running a statistical bureau.

Sarbini returned to Indonesia in 1955 to become the first Indonesian head of BPS, a post he held until mid-1965. During this period Sarbini participated in the annual conferences on statistics in Bangkok convened by ECAFE (Economic Commision for Asia and the Far East), which later was renamed Economic and Social Commision for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Most of the participants were, like Sarbini, new to their job, so participation in these conferences gave Sarbini and the other participants a much better understanding of the problems faced in collecting statistics, including the problems of holding a population census.

During his term in office Sarbini was able to transform the Bureau from a relatively small and centralised office into an agency which could collect statistical data throughout the whole of Indonesia. Preparing to conduct Indonesia first Population Census after independence in 1961, an Agricultural Census, an Industrial Census and the National Socio-Economic Survey (*Susenas*), Sarbini was able to establish BPS as a nation-wide operational organization. This involved the establishment of branch offices of BPS in every province, the Kantor Statistik Propinsi (Provincial Statistical Office).
During the early 1960s Sarbini faced increasing pressure from the then powerful Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) to resign as head of BPS and as chairman of the Association of Indonesian Economists (ISEI), which he also headed at the time. Although Sarbini resisted pressure from various government ministers to resign voluntarily, he was eventually dismissed as head of BPS in early September 1965. Sarbini's former deputy was subsequently appointed as acting head of BPS. In ISEI Sarbini was also able to prevent the PKI from controlling the organization by supporting a new chairman who was not beholden to the PKI.

Concerned about Indonesia's deteriorating economy, Subandrio, the Deputy First Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, in 1963 asked his friend Soedjatmoko for help in formulating a new economic program for Indonesia. Soedjatmoko subsequently consulted Sarbini and a few other economists, all of whom agreed that it would be politically important to accede to Subandrio's request, since it would be a good opportunity to drive a wedge between President Sukarno and the PKI by drawing attention to the country's serious economic problems.

The focus of the economic program which Soedjatmoko, Sarbini and the other economists designed was deconcentration (dekonsentrasi), which was basically similar to the deregulation concept under the New Order. Hence, the name Economic Declaration (Deklarasi Ekonomi), better known under its acronym Dekon, referred to the main focus of the program. The Dekon was mainly a combination of Soedjatmoko's and Sarbini's views, with Soedjatmoko dealing with the political and social issues.

Subandrio was very happy with the draft, but the PKI was able to undermine the thrust of Dekon by insisting to include an opening statement that Indonesia's national struggle consisted of several phases, and that Indonesia at the time (1963) was going through the national-democratic phase of the people's struggle, during which the focus should be on anti-imperialism. In this way the thrust of the original Dekon on deconcentration was completely erased.

At the beginning of the New Order General Soeharto established a Team of Economic Experts, headed by Professor Widjojo Nitisastro and a Team of Political Experts headed by Professor Sarbini. At the Second Army Seminar of 1966 Sarbini and Soedjatmoko presented a joint paper on 'The Problem of Political Stabilisation' in which the danger of creeping militarism, the need for an equal partnership between the military and civilians, and the need for press freedom, was mentioned. Not surprisingly, this paper was not well received by the military.

When Soeharto was officially installed as Indonesia's second president in 1968, he disbanded both the economic and political teams.
While the former members of the economic team (Widjojo, Ali Wardhana, Moh. Sadli, Subroto and Emil Salim) were subsequently appointed as cabinet ministers, Sarbini was offered the ambassadorship in Washington, DC, an offer he declined.

When in January 1974 anti-Japanese riots broke out in Jakarta, Soeharto’s intelligence agents looked for scapegoats and accused former members of Masyumi and the PSI (the Indonesian Socialist Party) which had been banned by Sukarno, of fomenting these riots. A few former members of PSI, including Sarbini and Subadio Sastrosatomo and student activists, including Sjahir and Hariman Siregar, were arrested and put in jail. Sarbini himself spent two-and-a-half years in jail without any trial.

Upon his release, Sarbini resumed his work with ‘Business News’, but continued to elaborate in various writings on the need to establish a ‘people’s economy’ (ekonomi kerakyatan) in which industrial strategy would have to focus on establishing rural industries to raise the welfare of the rural population.

Although Sarbini was not able to realize his ideals, his ideals live on, particularly among young people disaffected with the current economic conditions of high unemployment and poverty and widening economic disparities between rich and poor which are aggravated by widespread corruption.

REFERENCES:


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