

Ahmed Sukarno Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 8/20/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Ahmed Sukarno
Interviewer: Frank J. Miller
Date of Interview: August 20, 1964
Location: Bogor, Indonesia
Length: 15 pages

Ahmed Sukarno (1901-1970) was the first President of the Republic of Indonesia between 1945 and 1967. This interview focuses on Sukarno's admiration for John F. Kennedy (JFK), the strengthening of the relationship between the U.S. and Indonesia, and the progressive ideals advocated by JFK, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

Open.

Usage Restrictions

Copyright of these materials have passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Sukarno, Ahmed, recorded interview by Frank J. Miller, on August 20, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Ahmed Sukarno

Although a legal agreement was not signed during the lifetime of Ahmed Sukarno, upon his death, ownership of the recording and transcript of his interview for the Oral History Program passed to the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The following terms and conditions apply:

1. The transcript is available for use by researchers.
2. The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.
3. Copyright to the interview transcript and tape is assigned to the United States Government.
4. Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request for a fee.
5. Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Ahmed Sukarno—JFK #1
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
2	Sukarno's first impressions of John F. Kennedy (JFK)
3	Contrast between Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations
4	Sukarno on JFK's work toward "Revolution of Mankind"
7	American public's resistance to progressiveness of Kennedy administration
9	Ideological premise of Indonesian Revolution
10	Sukarno on American foreign aid
12	Sukarno's admiration for JFK's stance on civil rights
13	Sukarno on U.S.-Soviet relations of the Cold War
14	JFK's plans to visit Indonesia

Oral History Interview

with

AHMED SUKARNO

August 20, 1964
Bogor, Indonesia

By Frank J. Miller

For the John F. Kennedy Library

Introduction and questions 5, 6, 8-10, and 15 as recorded in an interview at Bogor, August 1, 1964. Responses to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 11-18 from President Sukarno's written replies, July 27, 1964.

MILLER: This morning I was sitting beside His Excellency, Dr. Insinjur Sukarno, President of the Republic of Indonesia since its independence, and the foremost symbol of the cause of Indonesian freedom, since long before independence. President Sukarno has graciously consented to an interview in which he will give his comments, responding to a series of questions relating to President Sukarno's acquaintance with John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the late President of the United States of America. The questions and comments will deal with some of the acts and policies of President Kennedy and his administration; and with President Sukarno's appraisal of the Kennedy administration's place in the development of United States policies in recent years. This interview is one of a number which are being conducted with world leaders. The record of the interview with President Sukarno will be preserved in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts, as an historical record and memorial to the late American president. I am Frank J. Miller, interviewing His Excellency, President Sukarno, at the Presidential Palace at Bogor, West Java, on this first day of August 1964.

QUESTION 1: President Sukarno, as your Excellency recalls, the news of the tragic death of President Kennedy brought forth astonishing and deep expressions of affection for this youthful President from virtually every quarter of the earth.

Your Excellency also remembers that Mr. Kennedy had earned an unusually wide reputation in the United States, long before he became President, for his vigorous and positive interest in enlarging America's world-consciousness and world cooperation. It has been said of him in the United States that he stood not only for something,

[-1-]

but for something well in advance of accepted goals or objectives. History will show to what extent this was so.

You knew Mr. Kennedy well, Mr. President. It is most gracious of you as head of a great, new nation to give me an interview based on your acquaintance with John Kennedy and his administration.

May I begin, Mr. President, by asking, when did you first meet John Fitzgerald Kennedy?

SUKARNO: My first meeting with John Kennedy was in the spring of 1961, when I paid a short visit to Washington and Los Angeles in the course of a world tour which took me to four of the world's continents.

QUESTION 2: Mr. President, it is a rather human trait to form first impressions when meeting someone. What was your initial impression of John F. Kennedy?

SUKARNO: Of course, his youth and his informality struck me as they must have struck all those meeting him for the first time. But I was soon to discover that behind his easy-going manners there was a keen mind in constant search for new and better ideas. Although this first visit was brief, we had long conversations on various issues and I was most happily impressed by his fresh and uninhibited approach towards the inherent problems of growth faced by the developing countries of Asia and Africa.

[-2-]

QUESTION 3: Mr. President, did your first impression change as you got to know each other better through meetings and correspondence?

SUKARNO: Well, as I knew him better, my personal regard only grew.

QUESTION 4: Your Excellency, when Kennedy was elected President of the United States, many people thought he was too young to hold such a powerful office. Did you share that view?

SUKARNO: Youth in their leaders is nothing strange to states like Indonesia which regained independence less than nineteen years ago. In any case, it is not a

leader's years which count, but his competence and ability to lead his people under the internal and external conditions with which they are faced.

QUESTION 5: Mr. President, you have had many contacts on vital issues with the administrations of four American presidents — Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and now President Johnson. This is a breadth of contact that few other Heads of State have had.

Do you see any significant differences among the four administrations, and if so, would you be good enough to comment on them?

SUKARNO: Well, Mr. Miller, I cannot, of course, comment on any significant differences as they may have been apparent in America's own domestic scene. Naturally enough, we appreciate the impact of the

[-3-]

four different administrations only with regard to their world context in general and, specifically, with regard to questions affecting our own country. Then there are the different periods of time in which the different administrations worked.

I should, however, like to mention one significant difference, for instance, between the Eisenhower and the Kennedy periods of administration. This was one vitally affecting us. Under Kennedy, non-alignment, often misnamed neutralism at that time, was no longer regarded as immoral. As you may recall, John Foster Dulles had earlier based his policies upon the assumption that it was. Well, at that time, there still lingered from the pre-war times, the idea that the world must adapt itself to America as the most powerful nation in the world. The American way of life was regarded as applicable to every country in the world and certainly to the new nations then emerging.

QUESTION 6: Mr. President, when you visited the United States in 1956 I remember seeing you in Broadway, in New York City, during that city's reception for you.

It would be of interest to hear you compare your impressions of that visit and your meeting with President Eisenhower, and of your visit and meeting with President Kennedy, five years later.

SUKARNO: Mr. Miller, during my first visit to the United States in '56, my mind was, naturally enough, excited at the idea of seeing the homeland of Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and the other architects of the American Revolution. It was to America

[-4-]

as the "centre of an idea," as I said, that I came then. During my visit in '61, however, I was more conscious of the fact that the American Revolution, in spite of the lift of heart it gave to the French revolutionaries, had not proceeded on to meet half way that tremendous, all-penetrating

transformation of the world that I call the Revolution of Mankind; nevertheless, in the America of '61 I found plenty of material to support and illustrate the idea that was then growing in my mind— the idea that beside the established forces of the old order, there were emerging new forces which were surging forward to build a new order in the world — the forces which were the active elements in the Revolution of Mankind.

As to my meetings with the two Presidents, perhaps I can say in retrospect that Eisenhower was a representative of American achievement, being a famed general covered with the glory of victory in the second World War; whilst, when I returned in '61 it was to meet a vigorous young man, full of enthusiastic intentions to explore the “new frontiers” of the new era dawning for mankind.

By the way, perhaps it was apt that I met those two men as I did at those two different times — the first, a worthy representative of America's great past, the second personifying the new forces emerging amidst the turbulence and upheaval following the war.

My definite impression was that President Kennedy was trying to accept a new order in the world based upon the independence of all nations, their forceful thrust towards establishing social justice, abiding peace and the brotherhood of Man, and a new order in which international relations should no longer be merely the vehicle of pure power politics.

[-5-]

In this context, it appears to me that Kennedy was trying to make the United States adapt itself to the new conditions in the world. That is why he felt the need to revive the revolutionary spirit of America, creating the concept of “new frontiers,” et cetera.

I do not know whether he found the correct formula for this process of adaptation, but, in any case, President Kennedy's efforts made their impact upon the world and upon the American people themselves.

QUESTION 7: Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President, President Johnson and Senator Fulbright have recently expressed their separate views on various world changes and American attitudes which bear on our foreign relations. I believe it would be accurate to say that both men feel that American policy must be able to adjust to vigorous independent national politics often different from ours, while still preserving the main lines of our own policies.

Considering the many great changes which have come swiftly on the world since 1945, do you think President Kennedy's administration appreciated the significance of the changing world situation?

To what extent do you think his Administration showed an ability to devise and implement policies appropriate to the times?

SUKARNO: I think that it was precisely this appreciation of a changing world situation which was so encouraging a factor of Kennedy's election. The very platform on which he stood showed a keen awareness, intuitive though it may then have been, of the necessity for the United States of American to adjust its orientation to the fast-changing world.

The tragically short period that was given to him to implement

[-6-]

his ideas, in my view prevents us from making a fair appraisal of the measure that was achieved.

QUESTION 8: Mr. President, five years ago, while Mr. Kennedy was still a Senator, he said that seven peaceful revolutions were rocking the American nation and the world. Among these he referred to the “revolution of nationalism.” He said, “In Asia, Latin America, and particularly in Africa, man’s eternal desire to be free is rising to the fore.”

On the basis of your acquaintance with President Kennedy and your knowledge of his administration, do you think his administration reflected an understanding of the characters and the roles of the major emerging nations and of their consciousness of nationalism?

SUKARNO: Mr. Miller, look; we must make a distinction between Kennedy and the Kennedy administration. It is one thing for a Kennedy to appreciate the changing world situation, or to understand the role of nationalism in shaping the policies of the merging countries, but what can be expected of an administration is quite another matter. Whilst Kennedy himself was a progressive leader, and his immediate associates were fired by his vigour and enthusiasm, the Administration could not be subjected to the drag upon it of a society which, as a whole, was not yet fully prepared to accept these progressive ideas.

[-7-]

QUESTION 9: Mr. President, in your writings and speeches you have called attention to the Revolution of Rising Expectations and Rising Demands, which is being witnessed all over the world at this time.

Do you think that President Kennedy appreciated the intensity of this revolution?

Do you think his Administration responded to this revolution in its policies and programs?

SUKARNO: Mr. Miller, I wonder if President Kennedy — or any other American leader, so far as that goes — could have seen this matter of rising expectations and demands in quite the same way as we of Indonesia do. For one thing, there is often a tendency when speaking of rising expectations and demands to think in terms of purely material needs alone; whereas Indonesia is explicitly concerned — and concerned equally, at the very least — with mental and spiritual needs, such as the freedom to be really free, and the right of social justice as between nations as well as within the nation.

The Revolution of Rising Demands is now becoming generally understood because the social consciousness of Man is now everywhere the same and has penetrated everywhere throughout the world. What needs to be better understood, however, is the rising demands of Revolution.

The Indonesian Revolution cannot be carried out on the same plane as the American Revolution, or the French Revolution, or the Soviet Revolution. Certainly, the American

Revolution was progressive for its time, in an international as well as in a national context, fulfilling the needs of the time at both levels.

[-8-]

The Indian Revolution is adapting itself to the present course of human history, with its new demands and requirements never existing before today. The Indonesian Revolution is compelled to meet these rising demands of revolution; that is, it must adapt itself to the common social consciousness of Man, irrespective of race, color and creed, must proceed in keeping with the progress of technology, which in this twentieth century for the first time in human history is capable of producing material comfort for every man, woman, child throughout the world, but which, however, through nuclear fission, has so increased the destructive power of armaments as to practically preempt global war. These are the rising demands of Revolution, which Revolution has never had to face before.

Therefore, if we stick to the ideals of our Indonesian Revolution which are in keeping with these new requirements, the Indonesian Revolution will be seen to have been the most progressive and the most modern in its ideological conception.

However, to return to your question, Mr. Miller, and as I pointed out before, the encouraging feature of the Kennedy era was a conscious and sincere attempt to gauge the process and direction of the World Revolution in its true perspective, instead of trying to mold it to a pattern of practice and of growth accepted by but a part of the world.

[-9-]

QUESTION 10: Your Excellency, as you know, your recent public statements on American foreign aid have attracted wide attention in the United States.

Would you say what you think about the Kennedy administration's policy on foreign aid; on its understanding of the objectives of a sound and effective foreign aid program; of its limitations, economic and political, and its optimum possibilities?

SUKARNO: Well, Mr. Miller, I do not profess to know the philosophy or political policies of American foreign aid. So far as I know, this seems to be a complicated question of considerable argument and perennial debate in your own country.

On the other hand, I have nothing but praise for the sincere efforts of men to help their fellows and, in this context, of course I welcome material aid extended to countries still struggling to develop their societies and to build their nations.

You will agree with us, however, that providing aid does not imply a donor's right to bully and threaten a recipient, much less to vilify him. To aid with such stigmas, I say again, "To hell with it!"

QUESTION 11: Mr. President, I have often heard you say that you do not speak in your own name — as Sukarno — but that you speak as the Voice of the People of Indonesia.

To speak for his people — to be effective as a leader, the leader must be able to enlist the support of his people for his policies.

As the leader of a great nation, may I ask you, how would you appraise the influence of President Kennedy on

[-10-]

the American public attitude toward the new, neutral and unaligned nations? Did you discern any significant changes from earlier American attitudes and policies?

SUKARNO: I feel I have already answered that question in previous remarks.

QUESTION 12: Your Excellency, as the Head of State you had considerable contact with the Administration of President Kennedy during its entire three-year course until his death.

How did you estimate the possibilities for Southeast Asian-American mutual understanding and cooperation under the policies of his Administration?

SUKARNO: So far as the Indonesian Government is concerned, I can say that the qualities I have referred to before certainly gave rise to hope that mutual understanding and cooperation might increase. And I have a feeling that this hope was shared by other Asian and African countries.

QUESTION 13: The question I would like to ask you next, Mr. President, deals particularly with personal qualities.

With the increased use of personal contacts and the prominence of what is called personal diplomacy since World War II, the personal relations of major leaders seem to have been an important factor in international relations.

[-11-]

Your Excellency is well acquainted with the numerous able and astute leaders on the contemporary world scene. What is your appraisal of Mr. Kennedy's effectiveness in dealing with the major world leaders?

SUKARNO: Well, I think that the American people should be a better judge of that than I.

QUESTION 14: Mr. President, as the leader of the Indonesian people even long before the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia, you have dealt successfully with many difficult national problems and divisive influences.

You can appreciate the very difficult and sensitive Civil Rights issues which Mr. Kennedy found in the United States when he became President.

What do you think of his approach to such issues as the racial problem in the United States?

SUKARNO: Indonesia regards racial discrimination as a crime against humanity over which no compromise is possible. It is a sad fact, however, that in some parts of the world racial discrimination has arisen as a heritage of history in such a way as to create acute problems for the state concerned. And so we consider that President Kennedy did what could and should be done in the context of the social milieu of the United States at that time. His courage was born from conviction and his decisive acts were applauded the world over.

[-12-]

QUESTION 15: President Sukarno, you know the history of Soviet-American relations and disputes since World War II, and of their mutual concern, among these two nations, over each other's political activities and military preparations.

Do you think President Kennedy had a clear appreciation of the character of the contemporary Soviet leadership? Do you think he was making progress toward achieving a workable modus vivendi with the USSR in the nuclear age?

SUKARNO: Mr. Miller, what is happening in the Soviet Union and in the Socialist States, and in the newly developing countries is not a question of leadership. It is a matter of new concepts, of the drive of new ideas which have arisen because men were dissatisfied with the old conditions. Those old conditions resulted from ideas which only brought domination of the majority by a few people, or by a few nations.

At the beginning, perhaps those new concepts have been regarded as too harsh, or as heresies, just as happens with religions — Christianity, for instance, has known a number of new ideas branded heretical at first. Nevertheless, no matter how unpalatable the new concepts may have been initially, they have forced us to become more progressive; we have been forced to abandon the idea of "the ruling few," whether within a nation or among the nations; we have been forced to think in terms of social justice, both within and among the nations.

In the present world, it is only through social justice that we can establish peace and stable relations between nations. In the present world, it is only through social justice that the nation as a whole can prosper. There is no escape from this. This is a law of the twentieth century.

[-13-]

On the other hand, I do not see that the two systems will not meet each other as soon as they encompass the universal demands of Man at the present time.

I do not regard the clash of old and new ideas as an ordinary difference between nations. But, as with the past emergence of new religions which were first regarded as heretical, this is the development of human history we are witnessing, and I regard such differences as unavoidable.

In a humble way, I, together with the Indonesian people, are trying to stimulate the course of human history to flow in the right direction towards social justice for everybody, in law and in practice.

I am not concerned at all over the prosperity of mankind. The level of technological development so far reached can, if properly exploited, produce affluence for everybody. The problem we have to surmount today is to temper the egoistic nature of Man and of nations.

QUESTION 16: Thank you Mr. President.
Your Excellency, you invited President Kennedy to visit Indonesia. He told Ambassador Howard P. Jones only two days before his tragic death, how much he looked forward to coming to this beautiful country. I believe you were planning for this visit, were you not?

SUKARNO: Yes, I was looking forward to receiving President Kennedy, and I am sure that the Indonesian people would have given him a warm welcome.

[-14-]

QUESTION 17: Mr. President, you have visited the United States a number of times, but the visit that President Kennedy hoped to make to Indonesia would have been the first one by an American president to Indonesia.

Would you consider this fact to have any special significance, as an indicator either of personal or policy relationships?

SUKARNO: I'm quite sure his visit would not only have strengthened the bonds of personal friendship between him and me and between our two peoples, but, knowing President Kennedy's outlook, as I believe I do, I am sure he would have regarded this visit as personally significant and essential.

QUESTION 18: Mr. President, if God had been willing and if you had met again with John F. Kennedy, in Djakarta or in Washington, what would you have talked about most?

SUKARNO: If I am not much mistaken, most of our time would have been spent in discussing the most important world issues: the Great Revolution now sweeping mankind and the roles which, in the light of their respective revolutionary histories, Indonesia and American should play in that gigantic process of transformation.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-15-]